

Dancing with the Beast

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Dancing with the Beast

by [proser](#)

Summary

In order to catch a mediocre serial killer, Will must pose as Hannibal's date for a series of pretentious social events.

Hannibal is dramatic and jealous as ever, and Will is having a great time without the encephalitis. Of course, it's a love story.

Notes

Title comes from a lyric in the song "Tokyo (Vampires & Wolves)" by The Wombats :)

And, just so you know, this story is very much an AU. The timeline is sort of different from canon, so bear with me.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Désir

A cold December afternoon.

The sun has already set, and the fireplace in Hannibal's office is crackling with warmth. He stays close to that fire, warming his back as he watches Will pace among the bookshelves.

Will is unaffected by the temperature, it seems. The sleeves of his olive green sweater ride up his arms as he paces, and his hands lift to rub the back of his neck.

Hannibal's thoughts have been trailing as he listens to Will recount the new case. Will has attributed the killer's actions to *desire*, and the word and its synonyms continue to roll off of Will's tongue.

"He *wants* something," he grumbles, turning on his heel to continue the circuit of his pace. "Not the girls he killed. He doesn't desire them, not in the way that Freddie Lounds' article said he did."

Hannibal nods. The article depicted the murders as acts of lust, just days apart from each other. Both of the women were brunettes in their mid-thirties, of short stature and slim figure. They were both found dead in their bathrooms. As *TattleCrime* put it, the situation was practically stereotypical. One lone, sex-starved psychopath who lives out his fantasies by murdering women who fit similar physical profiles to the woman he craves.

"He left no DNA evidence on their bodies. There were no assault wounds, sexual or otherwise." Will shakes his head, and stops above the ladder. He looks down at Hannibal, still perched by the fire. "I just don't know what he *wants*."

"Desire is often difficult to pinpoint," Hannibal agrees. "It's his motive, his drive. It's your job to find out what that is."

Will groans, and turns to climb down the ladder. "I know that." He steps down slowly, rung by rung, careful not to slip as always. "But that doesn't help me know what he's craving when he kills them."

On the subject of desire, Hannibal allows himself to watch Will's movements. Ordinarily, he would be unaffected by them. He is not ordinarily familiar with that particular brand of want, but in recent months, it has haunted him. Off-handedly, he blames it on the thrill of bringing back the Ripper, but he knows that it's not the real case.

Quiet thoughts of skin and caress flit at the back of Hannibal's mind, and he dismisses them. Desire, *lust*, is nothing but a weakness in the end, something that will be held against the one that harbors the feeling.

He is used to drowning his desires. It keeps him safe. Desire is a feeling possessed by others, never himself, and it is something he knows how to take advantage of.

Will drops down into the seat across from him, neither graceful nor deliberate in his motions. Hannibal shifts in his stool, partially to turn another side of himself to the fire, and partially to get a better look at his not-patient.

"What do you desire, Will?" he asks him, tilting his head.

Will frowns. "What does that have to do with the case?"

"Everything," responds Hannibal. "By searching for your own desires, you learn the path to discovering those of others."

"I don't know." Will folds his hands on his lap and closes his eyes.

Hannibal bites back a frown as he sees Will's expression change to the one he wears when he is elsewhere. Outside of himself, looking into the mind of another.

A power Hannibal envies, certainly, but one that he can't help but think is damaging to Will.

"Are you with me, Will?" he asks. "I asked you what *you* desire."

Will's eyes open, and he shakes his head. "I don't know what he wants."

"You are not him."

"I'm not the important one right now."

The heat is searing against Hannibal's back now, so he stands, lifts the stool, and moves it to the side. Its wood is hot to the touch, and so is the fabric on his back. He moves back to sit at his desk, where the air is cooler.

"Don't you have something to say?" Will asks, watching him as he sits. "An objection?"

Hannibal smiles, a barely tangible thing to most, but he knows that Will picks up on it. "Would you like me to object? To tell you that you are important?"

Will looks away sharply. "Usually you try and steer the conversation back in the direction of myself."

"And I would, if I thought it would bear any fruit." He lifts a pencil from the desk to twirl in his fingers. "Today, however, it seems that you aren't in the mood."

"Am I ever?"

"Less so today than normal."

At that, Will laughs. "Thanks for noticing."

"It's my job to notice these things." His fingers slow, and so does the pen's rotation.

"You do a better job at it than every other shrink I've seen."

Hannibal sets the pencil back on the desk, a frown forming on his face. "I am not your psychiatrist, Will. These are just conversations."

"Yeah, sure." Will nods, an odd look settling on his face. "Conversations where I reveal my deepest, darkest thoughts, and you help me sort through them. Like a psychiatrist would."

"Or perhaps like a good friend," he offers.

Will looks up. "Is that what we are, Dr. Lecter? Friends?"

"We are what you deem us to be," Hannibal responds. "But it is simpler for both legal and financial purposes that I am not your psychiatrist."

"Friends don't meet in an office three times a week."

Hannibal watches Will now, who is reclined back in his chair with his eyes and the ceiling. "They can," he says. "But if you would prefer, we could meet elsewhere to have our conversations. They need not be so official, if that is more to your liking."

"This is fine." Will lets out a long sigh, and he looks as though his eyes are tracing patterns in the ceiling above him. "I'm not so good with socializing--you know that."

"Then perhaps this is a chance to practice."

Will turns his head to look at him, a teasing grin lining his face.

"Spoken like a true psychiatrist."

Desire is a tricky concept.

In the days following that session, Hannibal finds himself pondering it, questioning its meaning.

What do I desire?

His first answer is beauty.

Hannibal strives to live surrounded by beauty--in art, in music, in food. He fills his home with artistic creations for his eyes to feast upon; he attends operas so that his inner ear may be satisfied; he cooks so that his tongue may be enraptured by flavor. Those are safe things to desire, he reasons. He can acquire them on his own, without depending on others. They cannot be used against him.

His second answer is revenge.

When he hunts, he is cleansing the world and himself. When he devours, he is righting what is wrong, and he is not letting the faults of the world overcome him. That is not such a safe desire, but he believes it to be worth the risk. He is not easily blindsighted in his efforts, and he knows he cannot be caught.

His third answer, and perhaps the most damning, is understanding.

Hannibal lives a life in secret, a life he does not share. He does not share because that is not safe, but he wants someone to know. He wants someone to see him and to know him fully and to *understand*. And that is not safe, because it means vulnerability. It means dependency.

When Will returns for his next session, he is brimming with understanding.

But not for Hannibal. Not for the Chesapeake Ripper.

His understanding is for the Egalitarian.

"Two more killings," Will says, with bright eyes perpetually weighed down by exhaustion. "This time, another similar pair. But they don't match the profile of the first two."

"Yet you sound sure that they are connected."

"They are," Will says, leaning forward in his seat. "The first two women shared similar physical appearances, but their lifestyles were entirely different. The first woman who died was a single mother of three; she worked two jobs and had always been of low socioeconomic status. The second, her basic physical doppelgänger, was a senator's daughter who married a millionaire."

Hannibal nods. "A curious contrast. It carries over onto the next two victims?"

"Yes," Will says, and he sounds almost eager. "The third one we found was an older man. Asian, tall. He owned a golf course in D.C., and we found him hanging in his kitchen." Will raises his eyebrows.

"Very different from the first two," Hannibal replies.

"Yes, but the fourth matched the third. Similar physical features, same circumstances in death. The defining difference was that he was dirt poor."

Hannibal nods. "So, our killer is taking them in pairs."

"He's giving them equality in death that they never shared in life."

"An opportunity based solely on appearances, to contrast the differences they had in life despite their similarities."

How shallow, he thinks.

"Jack's calling him the Egalitarian."

"How creative," Hannibal deadpans.

"You don't seem to like it so much."

"A strange title to award a murderer as crude as he, I suppose." Hannibal pinches the bridge of his nose. "Does that mean you now know what he desires?"

"Yeah." Will smiles. "Didn't have to dig too deep within myself for that one. The evidence presented itself."

Hannibal can't help but feel disappointed, though he's at a loss as to why.

"Has the cause of death been determined for the first two?"

"Poison." Will's eyebrows knit together. "Actually, all of them were poisoned. Katz said it was arsenic."

"A bit archaic."

"That's what she said to me," he mutters. "The second pair died from the poison and were strung up afterwards."

Hannibal nods, pensive for a moment. "Then he isn't staging them as suicides."

"No," Will agrees. "He's made it clear that they're murdered. The rest is theatrics."

"And what does Jack have to say about all this?"

Hannibal knows that Jack Crawford must be hung up on the Ripper's recent resurgence. The rise of a new criminal is likely a major inconvenience to him, and despite their growing familiarity, the thought amuses Hannibal.

The amusement pales as he notices the look on Will's face: his lips drawn into a frown, his eyes heavy.

Will is tired, because Jack is having him work on both cases. He's being stretched too thin.

"Jack's still Jack," mumbles Will. "He can't help it."

Hannibal sighs. "You work too hard. Have you been sleeping enough?"

He can tell that he hasn't. Too busy focusing on other parts of Will, Hannibal has neglected the bags gathering underneath his eyes like suitcases. His shoulders are hunched forward in an exhibit kindred to relenting. He is tense, unnaturally tense, and he reeks of stress from the cortisol hurtling through his system.

"The nightmares haven't stopped, if that's what you mean."

"Nightmares are not the only negative consequences accompanied by your work with the FBI, Will." Hannibal takes in Will with another look, and the desire tickling at him is washed away by something else entirely.

Compassion, he thinks, and it's even stranger to him.

"I know," he says. "It follows me in the day, too. I feel like--like something has latched on inside of me. Like a parasite. It moves with me, moves like me. Sometimes I even think it *is* me."

"While that is another concern in and of itself, I was referring to your lack of self care."

"Oh." Will ducks his head slightly, averting the gaze that Hannibal was just thinking of casting at him.

"You're not eating, Will, and you're not resting. Something needs to be done about that."

Will's nose wrinkles; it's definitely something that he has heard before.

"And what something is that, Doctor?" he demands.

"If you're concerned that I will put you on an involuntary hold at the hospital, you needn't worry."

Will's expression immediately relaxes, his fear relieved.

"But," Hannibal adds, "should this behavior continue, I will find it necessary to do so."

He would never send Will to a hospital, though. The idea of allowing anyone else access to the world's most wonderful mind makes him seethe. If Hannibal had any say, and likely even if he

didn't, he would never subject Will to seventy-two hours of mindless interrogation from therapists and psychiatrists oblivious to the beauty of the mind before them.

Hannibal senses that Will knows this, on some level or another.

"Then what do you think I should do?" he asks, wearing a hesitant expression.

"Allow me to cook you dinner," Hannibal offers.

He can see that this takes Will off-guard, if for just a moment. It's a satisfactory thing.

"Do you have all your patients over for dinner?"

A defensive question, but also one that merits an answer.

"No," Hannibal replies, "but remember, Will: you aren't my patient."

"I told you I wasn't good at socializing."

"And I am giving you an opportunity to practice."

Will looks exasperated for just a moment, on the verge of rolling his eyes, but he concedes with a polite half-smile.

"I suppose I could use something decent to eat."

Hannibal thinks of the scent on Will's breath when he greeted him at the door. It had been nothing but instant coffee and mediocre whiskey.

"I know you could."

Se Soucier

Chapter Notes

I'm posting this early because I had a scare where it took me about 10 minutes to find it after saving it. It wasn't being displayed but I found it under the chapter index, thank god.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Will refuses Hannibal's offer to drive him, so he follows behind in his own car. Hannibal finds it amusing, to say the least; Will's outdoorsy vehicle does not at all belong in his classy Baltimore neighborhood, and seeing it parked in his own driveway feels surreal.

He waits at the house's front door for Will, and watches as he practically stumbles out of his car. The exhaustion evident in his motions is disturbing, but the string of half-muttered curses that trail from his lips as he marches up to the door are almost charming.

His hands are stuffed in his pockets and his head is dipped when he meets Hannibal at the door.

Hannibal watches for a moment, suppressing a smile. He notices the way that he shifts his feet, the way that his brows furrow in thought. His cheeks are flushed pink from the cold: the only sign of color left in his pallid skin.

He looks up, frowning. "You gonna let me in, Doctor?"

Hannibal acknowledges him with a small nod, and turns to open the door. "Of course," he says, slipping his key out of the pocket of his trousers. "I was just making sure that you're fully awake."

"I'm fine," Will huffs.

"So you always say." Hannibal turns the key and unlocks the door. He holds it open for Will to enter through. "Have you been in my home before, Will?"

He knows he hasn't, but he thinks the indifference of the question will suit to mask the troublesome affections building inside of him.

"You never invited me," Will replies. He steps cautiously through the doorway, shifting his gaze to assess the contents of the living area.

More than just in passing, Hannibal wonders what Will sees. He wants to know what he has gleaned from this insight into his life. Does he see Hannibal in the furniture? Does he feel Hannibal's presence in the art hung on the walls? Can he hear small truths reverberating from the kitchen, revealing the forbidden?

Or is Will just like the others? It would be disappointing, Hannibal thinks, if Will fell for his constructions and facades as easily as everyone else.

A twinge of unease passes over him.

He shouldn't want Will to know.

No one should know.

Will's eyes lock on the fireplace, and a peculiar look passes over his face.

"Will?" Hannibal asks, stepping through the threshold and closing the door behind him with a quiet *click*.

"It's beautiful," Will remarks.

At that, Hannibal smiles. It was certainly not the reaction he was expecting, but it is by no means a disappointing one. "I'm glad you appreciate it. Your tastes continue to surprise me."

Silent, Will scuffs his feet on the mat by the door, and crosses over the wood floor to stand in front of the unlit fireplace. His hands brush over the stonework, and he slides them back to touch the wall.

Hannibal thinks he sees reverence in the movement, but he can't be sure.

"I'll light a fire," Will murmurs. He runs his hand over the top edge of the mantel. "It's chilly."

"There's no need," Hannibal tells him. "Relax and make yourself at home. I'll tend to everything else."

Will's hand drops to his side, and he looks up at Hannibal. His voice firm, he says, "I'd feel more at home if you'd let me tend the fire. It would give me something to do."

Hannibal's nose twitches in disagreement, wanting Will to rest, but he turns away before it can be registered. "As you wish," he says. "I will prepare our meal. You will find kindling and wood out in the back shed. Be careful not to let anything tarnish the floor."

As he walks away, he can hear Will's muttered, half-sarcastic, "Of course."

Hannibal prepares the havabour with care.

It's a delicate dish. The eggs must be whipped until they are perfectly homogenous before the broth can be added, and even then, the process is slow. The hot broth is added spoonfuls at a time to prevent the eggs from cooking into scrambled clumps. They must remain liquidated, smooth, in order to become the creamy addition to the broth that the dish calls for.

The kitchen is fragrant with lemon when he is finished, and he leaves it to rest for a moment while he checks on Will.

He peeks his head into the lounge area to find Will sat crosslegged on the floor. He is focused on the fire, consumed by its heat, lost to the flames he has created.

Hannibal imagines the fireplace as an incinerator instead--metallic and searing and secret, filled with the unwanted flesh and bones of mindless victims. His head swims with the idea of Will staring intently at the disappearing evidence of a perfectly-executed murder.

His breath catches at the thought: an image of the man Will could be.

Will hears the sound, or perhaps is disturbed by something else. Either way, he turns to regard Hannibal, who cherishes the fractional glimpse he gets at the burning behind Will's eyes.

"I got it going," he says. "Took me a while to find the shed, though. Couldn't see it for the trees."

"And so we are all lost to the greater picture," Hannibal hums, entering the room. His coat is hung up in the kitchen, the apron discarded there as well. He feels almost bare in front of Will, in only a vest and shirt.

A part of the picture he presents has been flaked away.

"I think that's twisting the metaphor," Will answers, pushing himself to his feet.

"Am I not allowed?"

Will pauses. "Is the food ready? Something smells amazing."

"Yes," Hannibal answers. "I've finished preparing the soup. We may eat whenever you are ready."

Rolling his shoulders, Will lets out an exhale. "That was quick," he answers. "For some reason, I was expecting a three-course meal."

"Is that what you would prefer?"

"No." Will shakes his head. "I like the idea of something simple."

"I thought tonight should focus less on extravagance and more on your comfort. This is, after all, an exercise to improve your current state of health."

The corner of Will's mouth twitches. "An exercise?"

"Call it what you will."

Will's head tilts, and his face smooths over with an expression Hannibal can scantily recognize. He can't help but feel transparent in that moment, as if Will sees something he has meant to conceal.

The idea both enthralls and terrifies him.

"Could we eat in here?" Will asks, the expression settling back into neutrality. "I worked so hard on the fire; I wouldn't want to settle for the chill of a dining room now."

Hannibal wants to tell him that the dining room, of course, would be plenty comfortable, but he finds himself unable to object. The idea of eating by the fireplace is intimate, comforting.

It throws him back, if for just a second, to other days. Before the cold and darkness had settled, when he could rest by the fire with Mischa and their pet runt and their parents watched over them.

"As long as you promise to be neat about it," he says, drawing away from the memory. "I would hate to spill anything."

"Of course," Will says. It sounds like the echo of a retort.

Will does not place value in objects and appearances the way that Hannibal does. A spill on the floor of his own home, or the dirtying of his furniture, does not bother him. He does not force that to translate to his attitude towards Hannibal's home, of course. It's clear he finds the care ridiculous, but he understands the necessity.

"It never hurts to be careful," Hannibal sighs, more to himself than to Will.

They eat their soup on the floor in front of the fireplace, sat on placemats and napkins spread over their laps. It's a compromise, and a ridiculous one at that, but it pleases Hannibal.

He feels young. Carefree, almost, were it not for the attachment to the man across from him slowly strengthening as the evening progresses.

Will is quieter than he is during their sessions. He eats his soup with muted pleasure, clearly enjoying it without much bravado. It's a refreshing change from the guests Hannibal usually has, who gush and praise his abilities, foolish enough to think they can flatter him with compliments he already knows to be true.

It's enough, more than enough, to see the quiet bliss on Will's face as he finishes the last bite and sets the bowl and the napkin on the floor next to him.

"I can't believe you made me chicken soup."

Hannibal smiles, and sets aside his own bowl. It's not entirely finished, but he was not nearly as hungry as Will must have been. "It's a widely accepted remedy for ailments of all kinds."

"Usually, I'd say it's psychosomatic," Will remarks, "but this is nothing like the Campbell's my dad would crack open when I had a cold."

"Good," Hannibal says. "I would hate to think my cooking is comparable to hypertension in a can."

The warm light of the fire flickers over Will's face, playing on the shadows of his nose and the contours of his cheeks. He raises a hand to his mouth, covering both a yawn and a grin.

"I do feel better. Thanks."

Hannibal can feel the sentence cut short, and raises an eyebrow.

Will shrugs. "I suddenly didn't find it appropriate to refer to you as 'doctor.'"

"Then don't." A warmth pools in Hannibal's chest, and it's more than just his body digesting the hot meal. "Call me Hannibal."

A small huff escapes Will, a calm cheeriness settling over him. "You *have* been trying to get me to drop the whole doctor-patient dynamic," he chuckles.

"Then you acquiesce?"

"Sure." Will nods, looking sheepish. "Friends, Hannibal?" he asks, extending a hand in mock formality.

Surprising him, Hannibal grasps his hand and shakes it.

"We are what you deem us to be."

It's not the first time Hannibal has said it. He knows Will is bound to catch on to the implications attached to it eventually, but he means it to be vague enough to leave him questioning its existence at all.

He seems to take that into consideration. A thoughtful expression passes over his face, his tongue sliding over his teeth absently, cleaning his mouth of any remaining residue from dinner.

Hannibal takes that as his cue to clean up. He picks up their bowls, napkins, and placemats-turned-seats to carry them away. Will remains seated, thoughtful.

"Would you like a glass of wine to polish off the evening?" Hannibal asks, ready to return to the kitchen to clean up.

Will looks up at him, a smirk on his lips. "I think you know what I'd prefer."

Hannibal knows he means whiskey, of course, but it can't hurt to indulge himself for the sake of humor.

"Do I?" he purrs. "You never mentioned your sexual proclivities in any of our sessions, Will." For added effect--purely theatrical, he tells himself--he lets his eyes wander the scape of Will's relaxed body.

Immediately, Will's eyes go wide as saucers and his posture stiffens. He's stunned for a moment, but then coughs out a laugh. "You're joking," he says, nearly sighing in relief. "God, Doc--I mean, Hannibal. Don't scare me like that."

Hannibal feels something plummet within him, and curses silently. He did not realize he had made himself *vulnerable* in speaking his mind, and chastises himself for being so brash.

He's not accustomed to *caring* about another's reactions beyond what is socially necessary.

"Of course," he replies, good-natured and even. "I believe I have some whiskey on hand. That *is* what you would prefer, isn't it?"

He means it wholly to be teasing this time, and it is in *no* way putting an offer back on the table.

Such flirtations would be uncalled for. Crass, even.

Will laughs, settled again. "You know me well."

"As friends do."

Hannibal says it under his breath, unable to believe the bitterness forming on his own tongue.

This is dangerous, he tells himself. *You're becoming attached*.

As he brings the dishes back into the kitchen, he forces himself to take a breath. Seduction is an art he has mastered, but one that he is not ready to be at the other end of.

Especially when the seducer isn't even being intentional.

He fears that the feelings he's tangling into are the same ones he inflicted on others, that he will end up the same way that they did. Mindless, pliable, usable.

His only hope is suppression. If he fails to overcome his attentions towards Will, he can conceal them before he recognizes the advantage they can give him.

Will is smart. He would capable of playing Hannibal like a fiddle were he to realize he was capable.

Hannibal does not intend to let that happen.

In fact, if he can, there won't be anything for Will to recognize. He will squash this unwanted fancy, and will return to himself.

The fact that he does not want to fathom what he would have to do should he fail does not turn the situation in his favor.

Having been on autopilot, Hannibal realizes that he's already procured the whiskey. It's a fine bottle. The glass is cut in geometric patterns so that the light scatters and plays with the rich color within. The spirit itself has been aged for thirteen years. Hannibal remembers thinking of Will when he bought it the month before. The number reminded him of the impossible bad luck that seems to follow the profiler around, and he had been just as caught with the beauty of the bottle as he had with--

Stop it.

He bites his tongue deliberately as he retrieves two glasses from one of the cabinets. The rich taste of his own blood pools on his tongue, and as a reprimand, he swallows it down as he returns to the fireplace.

Will has moved to one of the sofas, away from the fire. One leg is crossed over the other, and he clutches a throw pillow to his chest. He nods at Hannibal as he enters.

"The heat became a bit much."

Hannibal smiles curtly. It's a statement he can relate to.

"I thought this would be to your liking," he says, sitting down next to him on the brown leather. "I bought it when I was visiting the District of Columbia last month."

Will takes the glass and clinks it against Hannibal's. Taking a sip, he asks, "What brought you there?"

"A conference," he replies, the response as smooth as the alcohol he lets glide over his tongue. He hums with pleasure, from both the whiskey and from the memory of said 'conference.'

It had been a formal meeting, indeed, but the discussion was short. Hannibal did not wait long before he snapped the poor brute's neck.

"Ah." Will takes another, longer sip. "This is very good."

"Did you doubt?"

He laughs. "I guess it would have been foolish if I did."

"Oh, Will," Hannibal sighs, smiling amicably. Silently, he adds, *You are not the foolish one here.*

When they both finish their glasses, Will does not ask for a second, and Hannibal does not offer it.

"I should head home," he confesses, glancing at his watch. "It's passing nine."

"Yes," Hannibal agrees, filtering the reluctance out of his tone. "You need rest."

Will gives him a look that says he already knows that. "Regrettably, yes."

"Do you need something to help you sleep?" Hannibal inquires. "I might have some light sedatives for you to take when you get home."

The look on Will's face is hesitant, but he breaks it with a laugh. "Not my psychiatrist, but my on-the-side dealer, huh?"

"I told you that you needed proper care," he returns, ignoring the jest. "I have fed you, and ensuring that you sleep is only the next reasonable step."

"Well... yeah." Will nods and pushes himself to his feet. "I'd appreciate that."

Hannibal rises as well. "Gather your things, then. I'll be just a moment."

He slips back out of the room and up the stairs. He keeps a stash of medications in one of the guest bathrooms, and not for entirely stalwart reasons. If a guest is ill, then he is prepared, but he also has an arsenal of tranquilizers to subdue any unwanted visitors.

He unlocks the cabinet underneath the sink, and pulls out a small, unlabeled bottle. He pulls four small, white pills from the bottle and wraps them in a kerchief he keeps in his pocket.

Once everything is back in place, he returns to the living area, where Will is staring at a painting on the wall.

"Quite the Adonis you have here," he remarks.

"Patroclus, actually," Hannibal tells him, joining him in front of the painting.

The painting itself is named after its subject, *Patroclus*. A nude portrait, it uses shadows to dramatize the musculature of the subject: a dark haired man lain on a red cloth. His head is turned away from the viewer, so that only his back and side can be seen.

Will regards it with curiosity, and Hannibal wonders if he questions the implications of having such a painting on his wall--in the main room, no less. A more trained eye would understand it as a tasteful nod towards neoclassicism, and perhaps would have complimented Hannibal for his taste.

However, his guests rarely ever take notice of the painting. It is tucked in a back corner, alone in its place but still insignificant. No special lighting is cast on it so that the viewer can take note of the dramatic lighting the painter had imbued into the work itself.

Will doesn't comment further on the artwork, and turns to face Hannibal. "Well, I best be going."

"Yes." Hannibal reaches into his pocket and presents the neatly folded handkerchief. "Your sleeping aids enclosed," he adds, handing it over.

"Thanks." Will tucks it into the pocket of his coat.

"I've given you four, but two should do the trick. The other two can be used tomorrow night. They should hopefully ease your body back into a normal sleep schedule."

A skeptical look crosses Will's face. "I don't think that will work."

"Let's hope it does," Hannibal replies. "It would be unwise to grow dependent on drugs such as these."

"Any other dealer would be trying to get me hooked."

Hannibal shoots him a disapproving look.

"Sorry, not funny." Will smiles and shakes his head. "I'll see you later, Hannibal."

"Good night, Will."

He walks him to the door, but refrains from walking him out to his car. It takes a considerable portion of willpower to not ask if Will would prefer to stay the night.

He would have said that there were plenty of guest rooms available, that it would have been better to go to sleep earlier instead of take the long drive back....

But it would have been untoward.

Through his window, he watches Will drive away and disappear into the night.

He tells himself the ache at the base of his spine is from sitting on the floor for dinner, and not a longing for something that cannot be.

Chapter End Notes

patroclus

[havabour](#)

Curiosité

Chapter Summary

Hannibal's feelings prompt action.

"Tell me, Hannibal," Bedelia Du Maurier queries, "why are you really here?"

Hannibal remains still in his seat across from his psychiatrist. "As I said on the phone, Dr. Du Maurier. One of my patients requires an extended appointment, and their only available time slot happens to overlap our usual appointment time."

Her eyes narrow at him slightly. "That has never stopped you from maintaining our schedule before," she replies. "I have never known you to reschedule an appointment so last-minute--let alone asking to make it *early*."

He had called her the day after his dinner with Will. He requested that she see him the next day, which was over a week earlier than their scheduled monthly appointment.

"I see no fault in my actions," he replies. "I thought it would be best to hold our meeting now, as I have a free day."

"Yes," she hums, the sound deep in her throat. "And are you often free on Mondays?"

Hannibal chooses not to answer. Instead, he meets her gaze steadily.

Dr. Du Maurier sighs. "I never imagined I would have to tell this to you, of all people," she says, "but I cannot help you unless you tell me what is going on. Has something happened, Hannibal?"

He sees the stiffness in her shoulders as she asks, and he knows why it's there. She is the only surviving person to have caught a glimpse of what he is capable of, and he knows that she fears it.

He sees the truth in her statement, and once again is upset by his own emotional mechanisms. The fact that he is hesitant to admit to her his issue only speaks to its magnitude.

"Do you remember Will Graham?"

She nods. "Your patient, if I recall. He works with the FBI. Is he alright?"

"Will is not my patient," Hannibal clarifies, "and his position with the FBI is far from official. As for the final question..." He finds a bitter laugh bubbling from his lip. "I question if he is ever alright."

The other doctor furrows her brows. "But he is on your mind?"

"Unbearably so."

A weight slips from Hannibal's shoulders as he says it, and a narrow understanding lights behind Bedelia's eyes.

"You had said you saw a possibility of friendship," she says. "Has something gone awry?"

"In a word," he groans, fighting the temptation to take his head in his hands and massage the tension building in his temples. Instead, he leans forward, his elbows resting on his knees, hands folded to support his chin.

He senses her curiosity piquing at this display.

"Am I seeing the man behind your person suit, Hannibal?"

Hannibal meets her eyes with a wry smile. "I should hope not," he tells her, "lest my situation be more dire than I had originally thought."

Bedelia picks up the pen resting on the notepad in her lap. "Tell me what's going on. Perhaps we can sort through your situation together."

"Perhaps."

He falls silent, unsure of where to begin. Dr. Du Maurier picks up on this, though his hesitance strikes her in a peculiar way.

"Last time we discussed Will Graham, you told me you thought he could understand you. Has he failed to live up to this expectation?"

"Not at all." Hannibal thinks of the subtle looks that crossed Will's face throughout their dinner together. They were the beginnings of understanding, the seeds of something deliciously promising.

"Then, has he seen too much of you?" Bedelia's expression is pensive, patient. She is appealing to Hannibal, trying to make this easier on him.

"There is no need to try and mollify me, Doctor," Hannibal tuts. "You know the look of a lovesick man when you see one."

She stills for a moment, a pacified shock emanating from her. "Is that what you think you are, Hannibal? Lovesick?"

He sits up straight and looks her directly in the eye. "I have seen the effects of such feelings on my patients and former lovers alike," he muses. "I assume that would be enough to recognize the symptoms in myself."

"You speak of love as if it were a disease."

"Isn't it?" He raises an eyebrow at her. "Contagious, sticky. It weakens us, makes us do things we would otherwise not. It overcomes the system, like a parasite, and it seems as though the only cure is the subject of our affection." He lets out another long sigh. "But like so many medications, they only make us sicker."

"And Will," Bedelia says. "Is he your medication, Hannibal?"

"Not yet," he confesses. "Not ever, I hope."

"You don't find yourself deserving of his love?"

Her questions are patient, polite. She is giving him the opportunity to shape the conversation to suit his needs, to make him more comfortable. He knows she knows the truth, however.

"I know you have questioned my capacity for love, Dr. Du Maurier," he tells her. "I did not think myself capable of it, either. But Will brings it out in me, somehow. He has left me craving it."

Bedelia clears her throat while she takes a moment to formulate her response.

"I don't know what you want me to say, Hannibal. I cannot make your feelings go away, and nor can I untangle them for you. If you are seeking validation, this is a very roundabout way of doing so."

"I don't expect any of those things," he says. "I had hoped a sympathetic ear would help relieve me of my symptoms. For a short while, at least."

She smiles.

"Perhaps what you need is not relief," she tells him, "but acceptance. You have told yourself that love is a weakness. I believe a successful goal would be to change that channel of thinking."

Hannibal scoffs. "Nothing good can come of love."

"That is because you have never allowed it." Dr. Du Maurier's tone has suddenly become sharp. "You have made the love of others into a tool. You have made sure that the end result is damning for the person possessing it."

Hannibal is silent. Perhaps she sees him more clearly than he had thought.

"Why is that, Hannibal? Did you envy the ones that loved you, for being able to do so?"

His response is choked.

"No."

He did what he knew how to. What he *had* to.

He sees a sharpness in his psychiatrist's expression. He sees that she is satisfied to pry him apart like this, to see him as she has never been able to before.

She is glad, he knows, because she's finally confirmed that he is human after all.

"I am losing my composure," he says, and it comes out as a growl, as if to prove his point. "Will Graham will be the end of me if I don't do something."

"How so?"

He grimaces, and the expression seems to delight her.

"I have never seen so much emotion come from you, Hannibal." A bright smile breaks out on her lips. "At first, I was willing to pass off your admission as infatuation, but I see differently now."

He thinks he sees something malicious flicker in her.

"I have a feeling Will Graham is going to be excellent for your therapy."

Hannibal drives home from his session with Dr. Du Maurier in a *mood*.

Something has to be done about that.

The Ripper has had his fun recently, and as much as Hannibal would *love* to put something out on display for Jack Crawford to labor over, he can't risk it. In his current state, he would be unable to execute such a delivery.

He considers, for just a moment, to bring out the Copycat. He remembers Will's accounts of the Egalitarian, and a flare of envy builds up within him. Will is focusing his attention on *that* unskilled monster instead of a much worthier, artful killer.

Hannibal. The Ripper. The Copycat. He would be happy if Will would focus that beautiful mind of his on any of those three instead of someone as brutish and tasteless as the *Egalitarian*.

But it would be reckless to make a public kill now. It would be satisfying, but reckless.

He wants to curse Will Graham for what he's done to him, but he can't find the words to do so. He can't muster up the spirit for it, either. He finds that the only person he can really be upset with is himself.

And, he supposes, whatever disgusting creature he happens to sink his teeth into.

He has a selection of people on call for situations like this. They're all predictable, so he's always prepared to hunt them down when he needs a quick, quiet kill.

Georgia Stanton is one of them.

As a real estate agent for the socialites of Baltimore, she thinks quite highly of herself. On several occasions, she has tried to convince Hannibal to sell his house and settle for something different, and he's grown quite tired of her nagging.

A single, career-oriented woman, she spends the majority her time in three places: her office, the gym, and her home. She never locks her back door, having grown up in the country, on top of convincing herself that she lives in a *very* safe neighborhood.

Hannibal thinks it will be quite entertaining to prove her wrong.

She will die quickly, of course. Without a display, there is no need to drag out the process. He imagines a quick blow to the head will be enough, and then he can harvest whatever meat he requires.

And her meat will be good quality, he knows. A woman as pretentious as she must be wise enough to take good care of herself.

Hannibal smiles.

He will dine well.

In the dead of night, the high society of Baltimore does not stir.

Still, Hannibal is cautious. He waits a few houses down, watching from the car he keeps for occasions like this. No one notices, no one cares that he waits.

He is there until the lights go out in Georgia's home.

He waits a few hours still after that, and it's a good thing that he does.

Someone else is stalking his prey.

He suspected earlier, catching movement stirring in the shrubs of a nearby lawn. He thought nothing of it, but now he is certain there is competition. He sees them crawling out from the shrubs and onto the front lawn.

Another predator makes the hunt far more interesting, he thinks.

He slips out of the car, and the figure sneaking closer to the house does not notice him. He sees them enter the security code at the front door, and they enter the house.

A friendly visitor, he knows, would not have been so surreptitious.

He makes his own way, through the back door, and keeps himself hidden. He hears a set of footsteps upstairs, and assumes it is his competition.

He hears the flow of running water from upstairs next, and then questions his judgement.

He listens for breathing, and hears none.

He is alone.

But Georgia Stanton is not, because a moment later, he hears her rise from bed. She is likely investigating the noise in the bathroom.

He does not pity her, but he is disappointed that his competition will get to her first.

He hears something drop, and he assumes the deed is done.

Knowing, now, that this is a game he will have no active part in, he finds a hiding place in a closet next to the stairs. He is able to hear fairly well, and he will have a view through the slats when the predator makes his escape.

The water turns back on, and it continues to run until Hannibal is certain that there must be an overflow. He hears speaking, shuffling, arrangements being made.

He wonders, for a moment.

He wonders if he has chanced upon the Egalitarian.

A few moments later, Georgia Stanton's other surprise visitor creeps down the stairs.

He is dressed in all black, and a ski mask covers his face.

Amateur, Hannibal thinks. *He doesn't trust his own abilities.*

Rightly so, he supposes, or Hannibal would not be able to observe him.

The suspected Egalitarian passes Hannibal without noticing him, but Hannibal is able to pick up on what he needs.

A scent.

He recognizes it, too. Silk and leather, silver and platinum, and a very distinctive brand of Japanese cologne that he's only ever smelled once before.

In the workshop of a very renowned jewelry designer.

Hello, Mr. Gaul.

Once Hannibal is certain that Jeremy Gaul has left the building, he steps out of the closet and goes up stairs to inspect the damage.

He finds Georgia Stanton floating at the top of her three-person bath tub, lifeless.

The scent of arsenic clings to the air, and Hannibal carefully covers his nose and mouth.

It was quick, he thinks. She likely died of shock.

There is no vomit or any other bodily fluids that would accompany the typical arsenic poisoning.

How did you do it, Gaul? What's driven you to work with such unsavory metals?

He knows he can trust Will to find out.

Avidité

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Hannibal sees Will next, he is rested.

The dark circles beneath his eyes have faded, and there is color in his cheeks. His facial hair is more carefully trimmed than it has been recently, and he holds himself straighter.

Hannibal takes the sight in, pleased--with himself or with Will, he isn't sure.

"You look well," he says, and lets Will inside. They are meeting at his office for lack of a better place to be.

Will grins in response. "Thank you," he answers. "Really. I think those pills did the trick."

It has been nearly four days since he gave Will the medication, and he can't smell it on him. It's a relief, frankly, because he was slightly worried that Will would find more and become dependent on it.

Will has an addictive personality, as he sees it, and Hannibal thinks it best to be cautious.

"So you've been sleeping well?" Hannibal asks.

With a smile, Will pulls off his coat and hangs it on the hook. "Yeah," he says. He looks relaxed. "Actually managed to cook something this week, too."

Despite himself, Hannibal can't help but feel happy. "Has something changed, then?"

Will shrugs. "These things come in ups and downs. I'll appreciate it while it lasts."

Hannibal can't help but frown at that. "You sound complacent," he remarks. "Complacency is where innovation goes to die."

Raising his eyebrows, Will takes a seat in his normal chair. "I don't see how much innovation my life needs." He laughs, a light sound. "I'm simple. I teach, I walk my dogs, I catch killers. If I feel fine for a while, I'm going to take it without complaints."

An agitated sound escapes from the back of Hannibal's throat, which earns him a surprised look from Will. He doesn't want Will to settle for just *fine*. He doesn't want him to live for short periods of decency and spend the rest of his life in a low-lying cloud.

But Will doesn't need to know he feels that way. Not yet.

Quickly, he decides to divert his attentions.

"And how goes the killer catching, Will?"

Ordinarily, Will's face would fall in response to the question. Today, he remains looking oddly cheery.

"We have a lead," he says. "I actually came here to discuss it with you."

For a split second, Hannibal's heart drops.

Where was my mistake?

But he composes himself, which is apparently no small feat anymore.

"How can I be of assistance?"

Color fills Will's cheeks, charmingly so, and any concerns that Hannibal had immediately melt away. A face as sweet as that couldn't mean any harm.

Or could it? Will has proven manipulative before--

Will's voice cuts off his paranoid line of thought. "You have connections in Baltimore, don't you?"

"That depends on where you look," confesses Hannibal, a wry smile touching his lips as relief cools him. "But, broadly speaking, yes. I live here, after all."

"I'm looking pretty broadly," Will replies. "At the higher society, mostly."

Hannibal is overwhelmed, for a moment, with the memory of Jeremy Gaul's scent. High society, indeed.

"You believe I can help you catch your Egalitarian?"

Will shrugs. "I'm hoping, at least."

"Hope is often all we have in times of desperation," he replies. "What can I do, Will?"

"Well..." Will crosses his arms, a reluctance fogging over him. "I don't think it's necessary, but Jack insisted that you would be able to help."

"Whatever you need," Hannibal breathes, and he's almost repulsed by the way it comes out of him--desperate and *wanting*. It's as if he's just offered himself up on a platter.

Will's lips twitch in an uncomfortable smile, and he stares for a moment.

"Jack thinks that if you... dragged me around with you, I might be able to spot who we're looking for."

This suggestion immediately intrigues Hannibal.

"Drag you, Will?" he inquires. "You don't sound willing to partake."

"I'm not a classy person," Will mutters. "I think it's pointless to dip my toes in that kind of arena. It would be easier to just track the Egalitarian's kills instead of trying to sniff him out in his everyday life."

"What arena are you referring to?"

Will just about rolls his eyes. "Once we found the third set of victims, we noticed a pattern."

"A third set?"

Hannibal suppresses a smile as he envisions the dead body of Georgia Stanton. He wonders who her counterpart was.

"Yeah," Will mumbles. "A real estate agent. She lived a few blocks from here, actually. The other victim was a bank teller from the other end of town." He pauses. "We found out that all three of the upper-echelon victims donated large sums of money to fund the restoration of the Baltimore Ballet Theatre."

"Curious." Hannibal pretends to mull this over, excitement prickling at his gut. "And you think that your connection is there?"

Will purses his lips. "We checked with Lynette Dao, the woman in charge of the restoration project. She said you also donated to the restoration."

It's true, of course. When Hannibal found out that a fine arts venue would be re-opening practically in his back yard, he could barely refrain from reaching for his wallet to support it.

"What are you suggesting, Will?"

"You might be in danger," he replies, lips drawn tight. "But, more importantly, you have top priority access to the tickets for opening night. And Jack wants me in there to scope the place out."

Hannibal is more than slightly pleased that there are no reservations behind Will's voice. It would appear that he is not being viewed as a suspect.

Why should he be? He's always been so careful, and he is in no way involved with the deaths at all. Besides his quick glimpse of Georgia's, of course.

"Will," Hannibal laughs. "If you wanted me to take you to the ballet, all you had to do was ask."

Will grimaces, likely unsure whether to take it as a joke or an advance.

"Believe me," he sighs, "I'm not in it for the ballet."

"A pity," Hannibal hums. "I think you would appreciate *La Bayadère*."

"The what?"

Hannibal smiles.

La Bayadère.

He has not seen it since he was in Moscow, nearly twenty-five years ago. He recalls it as one of the best nights of his life, and he was hopeful initially that he would be able to relive that when he discovered the Theatre would be performing it for their Grand Reopening.

Now, his hope swells, and he imagines this performance might be better than the first: with Will at his side, to be seen to all the world as his companion.

He feels a boyish giddiness prick his skin.

"*La Bayadère* is story of eternal love," Hannibal explains, reverential in tone. "Two souls destined to be together, with other, jealous powers attempting to tear them apart."

Will's expression twists. "Oh, sure," he mutters, sarcastically, "sounds like something *right* up my alley."

"It's poetic, Will." Hannibal pictures the incinerator once more, only this time, it is a sacred fire, and he is standing over it with Will. "Though, admittedly, full of jealousy and attempted murder."

"Like real life," Will snorts.

"Yes, but choreographed to stunning music. I would love to bring you to the show with me, if not simply for the sake of your case."

Will considers it for a moment, and groans something to himself. More clearly, he says, "Yeah. Not like I have much of a choice. Jack was practically pushing me out the door, telling me to go ask you about it."

The thought is amusing, though Hannibal doubts it was so dramatic. Still, he can't help but wonder why the fates (or Jack Crawford, at least) have suddenly conspired in his favor.

Perhaps this is his chance to seduce Will before he loses all control of the situation.

Why hadn't he thought of it before? He needn't shut down his own feelings, nor deny himself of his desires. He only needs to convince Will that their needs are one in the same.

"Well, Will," he declares, "It shouldn't be an issue to procure a ticket for you. Is there anything else I can do to be of service in the meantime?"

"Yeah, actually," Will replies, looking vaguely irritated. "Don't be so pleased about being able to drag me around on a leash."

"Please. You're the one who enjoys keeping dogs."

A few hours after his session with Will, Hannibal returns to his home.

There is fresh meat waiting for him in his refrigerator, wrapped in a paper parcel. After his failed hunting trip to Georgia's, he managed to catch and butcher another predictable morsel.

Louis Windell's thigh meat will make for a wonderful stew, he thinks, but it will have to wait a short while longer. His cellphone is ringing, and he tries to answer it himself when voicemail can be avoided.

Jack Crawford's name lights up on the screen, and he smiles in spite of himself. He slides to answer, holding it up to his ear.

"Doctor Lecter." Jack's voice plays out from the phone's tinny speakers, sounding cheerful.

"Jack, hello. Should I be expecting a dowry?"

At that, the agent laughs. "Will relayed my proposal, then."

"Are we calling it that?" Hannibal holds back a satisfied purr. "It's only a night at the ballet."

"The opening night, which you contributed to. I hear that carries some considerable weight in your social circles," Jack replies, sounding cautious. "That's why I called. I wanted to make sure that you were... comfortable with the idea."

Hannibal licks his lips. Jack is right, of course. The other members of his social strata tend to be horrible gossips, and they would revel in the opportunity to be the first to see the *unattainable Doctor Lecter* with another on his arm.

He knows the way in which he is regarded, and he intends to take full advantage of it.

Greedy, he tells himself, but his mind is not at all changed.

"I don't quite catch your meaning, Jack," Hannibal replies. He wants to hear Jack say it outright, as immature as it is.

There is a moment of silence on the other end.

"Well, Will is a man, and he's your patient--"

"Will is not my patient, Jack. You know this."

He hears Jack's surprised huff through the other end of the line.

"Then you're alright with bringing Will as your... your date?"

Hannibal smiles. "It's only one night, Jack."

"A night that will carry much larger implications for your peers," he reminds him.

"Please, Jack, this is not some adolescent squabble for social status." He laughs, more of a chortle, surprising himself. "I am secure in my own sense of self, and I would be proud to have Will with me."

"Really?" Jack sounds surprised. "He wouldn't... embarrass you?"

Hannibal suddenly feels a cold rage. "Why would you think that?"

Jack is silent. Hannibal suspects that the agent scarcely values Will beyond his skill to pick apart crime scenes, and likely finds his social tendencies to be bothersome. He remembers Will expressing this in a session, once, that Jack tended to try and keep him out of the public eye.

Hannibal doesn't care.

He feels a drive to show the world how beautiful Will Graham really is.

He clears his throat. "My only hesitation in bringing him with me," he says, brimming with masked enthusiasm, "is that it might raise suspicions. As you have mentioned, there is significance in the selection of a partner for this sort of event, and I am not known for choosing my companions on a whim. Showing up with Will for such a monumental event out of the blue will raise questions, not only among my acquaintances, but perhaps for the killer Will is meant to weed out."

"Meaning?"

"I think it would be appropriate if Will joins me in a few smaller events beforehand," he explains. "It would introduce him to the class he is searching within, and would muddy the waters should anyone suspect false pretenses."

Jack swallows. "Are you asking me permission for something, Doctor Lecter?"

"The permission is not yours to give," Hannibal returns. "You want me to help Will catch the Egalitarian; I am presenting you the smoothest path with which to achieve that goal."

"Huh." Jack is quiet for a moment. "Whenever I pictured sending Will back into the field, it wasn't anything like this."

"Is this the field, Agent Crawford?"

"No, I suppose not." Jack lets out a dry laugh. "Just be careful, Hannibal. This isn't exactly Will's forte."

"I will be extremely careful."

More careful than Jack has ever been, he thinks. The work that *he* forces Will into is slowly ripping the man apart.

What Hannibal wants does not require any ripping.

For once.

Chapter End Notes

The Baltimore Ballet Theatre is fictional, of course, but the Ballet Theatre of Maryland, as it turns out, also just had it's first professional ballet company in a long time. Fitting, I suppose.

And, ah this was kind of a short chapter, and so is the next one. But the next to AFTER that are plenty long, so worry not, if you're enjoying :)

Reconnaissance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hannibal is an early riser, but only when he has to be.

When there is the option, he prefers to sleep until midmorning. He savors waking to beams of golden light caressing his skin, begging his eyelids to open and see the glory of the new day.

When possible, he enjoys a leisurely pace, with longer time spent nursing his espresso than normal. Wrapped in his robe, left alone to listen to the birds outside his window, he would ideally take his time cooking breakfast, perhaps stretching it into more of a brunch.

Morning solitude is sacred to him, and he makes sure he can enjoy it one or two days every week.

This week, the free morning falls on a Wednesday. It's still early on in the winter, and the sun doesn't rise until past seven. Hannibal wakes to the thin, gray light of dawn--earlier than he would have wanted, but it doesn't bother him.

He yawns and stretches himself out underneath his sheets, taking up almost the entire bed. A smile spreads itself on his face, and he isn't sure why, at first.

Then, he remembers his session with Will from the afternoon previous, and his phone call with Jack.

He might not be completely doomed after all, he thinks, if he can ensure that his troublesome feelings aren't entirely unrequited.

With that happy thought (and he chides himself for being so giddy), he rolls out of bed. Having slept in the nude, the cool of the house jolts him, so he quickly slips on the red, plaid pajama pants he left folded on his night stand.

He startles when he hears the doorbell sound, and reacts by snatching the thin sweater left there, too. He pulls it on as he rushes down the stairs, resentfully realizing he likely won't be enjoying the morning he had planned on.

The doorbell only rings once, so Hannibal at least knows that his unexpected guest isn't *completely* rude. Though, showing up at dawn unannounced doesn't speak well of them.

He hurries to the door, thinking to himself how disheveled he must look as he opens it.

The thought dissipates quickly when he is met with an equally surprised Will Graham at the other end of the door.

"Will," he says. "How unexpected."

Will's blue eyes are wide, and he blinks slowly. "You're wearing pajamas." He sounds... awed.

"I just got out of bed," Hannibal tells him, with a slight tilt to his head. "Of course I am."

He shakes his head in what looks like wonder. "I guess I was expecting a silk robe."

"There's that, too."

Will smiles, looking slightly dazed. Hannibal feels as if he must look the same, having been so shocked (pleasantly) to see Will at his door.

But then, the young man's face hardens, and he clears his throat. "I talked to Jack last night."

"As did I." Hannibal can't help but frown at the loss of Will's amusing stupor. "What of it?"

"He said he changed his mind about the, ah, the ballet thing."

Hannibal's frown deepens. "Oh?"

Will nods, a grimace forming on his face. "Can I come inside?"

"Of course." Hannibal blinks and steps aside, holding open the door. "I hadn't meant to leave you out in the cold."

"Thanks." Will wipes his shoes on the outside doormat this time, and crosses the threshold.

"Would you like coffee?" Hannibal asks. He feels tentative, nervous, suddenly.

Isn't this how it was supposed to feel, being a teenager?

He almost scowls at the thought.

"Oh. Sure." Will nods, crossing his arms.

Hannibal closes the front door behind him and moves towards the kitchen. He hears Will following after him, his shoes striking the hardwood floor with small clacks.

He feels vulnerable, and not just because he's barefoot and in his nightclothes.

Once in the kitchen, he starts grinding the coffee beans. Will watches him, leaning against the counter, and says nothing over the loud grind of the machine.

When Hannibal flicks it off, he turns to Will.

"You wanted to discuss something?"

Will looks as if he's just been knocked out of a dream. "Oh. Yeah." He clears his throat again, seeming oddly distracted. "Jack said he wanted us to, ah, go... beyond the ballet night."

Hannibal's eyebrows raise as he transfers the ground beans to the espresso machine, tamping them down before setting it to brew. Ten, fifteen seconds, and it's ready.

He pours that into two separate glasses, which Will stares at in confusion.

Hannibal takes his espresso in one go, simply to show Will what to do.

"Jack said that, did he?" he asks, licking his lips clean of the remaining drink.

Will looks into the steaming glass, and throws it back like he would a shot of hard liquor, wincing just the same as he does so. "Yeah," he says, his voice slightly strained.

Hannibal isn't sure if he's perplexed or pleased.

"And by that he meant what?" he presses, wanting clarification.

The bottom of Will's glass has a tiny layer of golden foam leftover at the bottom. He stares at it curiously. "He said it would make more sense if I went... *out* with you before that occasion. Said it was a thing among you socialites." He scoffs. "I think it's ridiculous, but I came to check if you agreed."

Hannibal sets his glass back down on the counter.

Is this luck? What game is Jack Crawford playing? What made him claim the proposal as his own?

For some reason, Hannibal is grateful for it all the same. It feels safer, having Will think that it was *Jack's* idea that Hannibal spend more time with him.

"It would make sense," he says, feigning hesitation. "My acquaintances would certainly be alarmed to have you show up with me at such an important event. It would raise less eyebrows were I to introduce you slowly."

Will rolls his eyes. "I was worried you'd say that."

Hannibal wants to tell him that were he to have it his way, he would introduce Will as a permanent fixture in his life without hesitation. However, he senses that is certainly not Will's concern.

"Is it such a painful prospect?"

"That everything has to be a delicate social dance with you?" Will laughs. "Yeah, it kind of is. Even the meaningless things are all about appearances when it comes to you."

The words, admittedly, sting.

"It's no fault of my own, Will, but rather of the society I engage with." He knits his eyebrows, almost hurt. "Your accompanying me to the opening of the ballet would be seen as a strong romantic overture--a sign of permanence, if you will. It would be less alarming were the prospect to be introduced slowly, allowing your investigation to go smoothly."

"That's what Jack said." Will doesn't sound entirely convinced.

"Is it the charade that bothers you, Will?"

Will raises a hand to scratch at his scruff. "I would prefer a less dramatic way to go about it, yeah." The same hand reaches behind his neck, resting there. "But I guess when it's between you and Jack, there's nothing but drama, is there?"

"You would prefer a situation without romantic displays."

"I would prefer something less *messy*."

Hannibal laughs. Romance has never been messy for him, personally, but he supposes now that he has cards on the table, it very well could be.

But it would only end up *messy* if Will rejected him, and he refused to see that as a possibility. He needed this act, this *charade*, to successfully woo Will and prevent any messes from being made.

"A gradual introduction would make it infinitely less messy," Hannibal replies.

"But that begs the question of closing it off," Will replies. "Constructing a public relationship, only to end it just after this grand gesture you and Jack seem so hung up on... Wouldn't it be easier to just bring me and tell everyone I'm your *friend*? Or just get me my own separate ticket?"

Hannibal almost chastises Will for being ungrateful, but bites his tongue.

"Both situations would be extremely hard to believe."

Will's expression remains blank--perhaps agitated.

"It would be nigh impossible for you to procure a ticket to the event for yourself," Hannibal states. "And I don't bring mere friends along for public events."

"It's my understanding that you don't have lovers, either," Will points out. "None of this makes sense, Hannibal."

"I am simply trying to make sense of the situation with you," Hannibal sighs. "It's Jack Crawford's decision, not my own."

Will sighs, too--a long, tired exhale. "There's really no arguing with that, I guess," he says. Reluctantly, he looks up at Hannibal. "What do we need to do to make this damned thing more *believable*?"

Hannibal can barely suppress the grin threatening to overcome his lips.

He thinks that he ought to get Jack Crawford something nice to thank him for this gift.

Never would he have thought to consider the FBI man such a blessing.

Chapter End Notes

Another short chapter, sorry! The next one will be longer, I promise :)

Also, I started watching Season 3. Oh, gods. It's intense. Very intense.

Crédibilité

Chapter Summary

Our evil psychopath has hardcore feels.

I regret nothing.

"More believable," Hannibal hums.

He takes Will by the shoulders, using the opportunity to give him thorough looking over. He focuses on the depths of his blue eyes, which are desperately trying to look away. He moves to the faint color in his cheeks, the sharp lines of his jaw, the sleepy elegance of his stubble. The delicate curls of his hair, the contours of his neck...

"A tall order, I know," Will grumbles. "I'm not exactly--"

"You're fine."

Hannibal cuts him off immediately. He will not allow Will to believe he is anything less than superb.

Will's face contorts in confusion. "But I--"

"Stop." Hannibal squeezes Will's shoulders, and then drops his hands back to his sides. "My tastes are my own, Will, and no one has the right or ability to determine them for me. I suspect that if anyone foresees me presenting a lover at all, they *expect* to be surprised by my selection."

Raising an eyebrow, Will says, "I sincerely doubt that I'm your type, Hannibal."

The naiveté is enjoyable, certainly, but Hannibal hopes to change that perspective sooner or later.

"A mystery you will have to solve for yourself," Hannibal answers, a sly smile drawing on his mouth. "But not now. For the time being, breakfast."

He plans to prepare poached eggs with bacon over basil and garlic polenta. He starts off by boiling the water for the eggs, and then for the polenta in a separate pan. He preheats the griddle for the bacon. He crushes garlic, dices it, and minces the basil he picked fresh from his garden.

Will watches him curiously the entire time, as if he's never seen someone in a kitchen before. Hannibal knows very well that he has, of course, but the intrigue in his eyes is both clear and pleasing.

Once the prep work is done, Hannibal retrieves the parcel of uncooked bacon in his refrigerator. As he unwraps the paper, he senses Will watching over his shoulder in interest.

Hannibal can't suppress the smile that curls unbidden on his lips.

"I'm presuming you're a bacon fan, Will?" he laughs, glancing over his shoulder at the younger man.

Will smiles at him. "I guess it's just nice to know that even the immeasurable Hannibal Lecter enjoys bacon."

"Immeasurable?" asks Hannibal, taking a slice and dropping it onto the griddle, where it begins to sizzle almost immediately. "I had no idea you held me in such high regard."

Will snorts, moving from behind to stand next to him and watch the griddle. "You're alien to me, Hannibal," he says. "No one's like you. No one's as pretentious or as picky, or as big of an ass."

"Watch your tongue," he admonishes, playfully. "I'm the one preparing your food, after all."

Not perturbed by the joking threat, and still blissfully ignorant of Hannibal's true nature, Will inhales to smell the cooking meat as Hannibal places another slice on to cook.

"But of course," he sighs, looking delighted at the scent, "not even your bacon can be average." He shakes his head and smiles. "How do you even *get* fancy bacon?"

Hannibal grins and places another slice on. "By being extremely selective when choosing your pig," he answers. And he was certainly selective about this particular pig.

A brutish, foul man, Yuan Cole was an excellent selection, not only in his worthiness to die, but the quality of his flesh. Young, muscular, and well marbled.

The bacon, Hannibal knew, would be fantastic.

Once the bacon is on the griddle, Hannibal checks on the water. The pot for the polenta is boiling, so Hannibal slowly stirs in the cornmeal.

Will looks with even more curiosity at the water. "And grits?" he asks, sounding shocked. "You eat grits?"

"Polenta," Hannibal corrects him.

"Oh," Will says, raising his hands to his chest. "Forgive me. *Polenta*."

Hannibal laughs, freely, and rolls his eyes. He turns some of the bacon, and after making room on the griddle, he tosses the chopped garlic to cook in the grease.

He feels Will watching him, and it creates a pleasant burning sensation in his chest.

"What?" he asks.

Will shrugs. "It's weird seeing you laugh," he confesses. "It's weird seeing you in your pajamas. Cooking an almost-normal, homey meal."

Hannibal feels heat rise to his cheeks, but knows very well that Will cannot see any color there. Hannibal does not *blush*.

"Do you like seeing me like this, Will?" he asks.

"That sounds like a weird psychiatric question," Will mutters, leaning against the counter. A lazy smile is painted on his cheeks.

Hannibal smirks and stirs at the garlic. "It's a friendly question," he says. "There are no psychiatric questions between us."

"Not even when you're curious?" Will asks. His tone, suddenly, sounds colder. "From a professional standpoint?"

Having known the cheer wouldn't last, and still resenting its absence all the same, Hannibal sighs. "You're not my guinea pig, Will. The only professional action I will take regarding you will occur when you're endangering yourself."

"When, not if." Will sounds sullen.

"My apologies," Hannibal mutters. "I hadn't meant it like that."

"It's true, though."

When breakfast is ready, their spirits lift to enjoy it.

Will eats a large portion of food, which pleases Hannibal. Not only did he cook something Will truly enjoys, but he managed to get some good, honest-to-god nourishment into Will.

Well, not entirely honest, he supposes.

"You'll have to tell me where you get your pork," Will says, taking a fourth piece of bacon. The rest of his food is entirely polished off. "This is divine."

"I'm afraid my supplier isn't taking new customers, for the time being," Hannibal replies, the lie light on his tongue. "In time, however, I imagine taking you with me to procure the meat, should you feel inclined."

He smirks as he takes a bite of the polenta. Some of the yolk from the poached egg has leaked in, giving it the perfectly creamy texture he desires.

"I would love that," Will answers.

Hannibal hopes that statement will ring true when the time arrives.

When the food is finished, Hannibal doesn't rise to start cleaning up. Instead, he folds his napkin and sets it on the table, and takes a moment to regard Will intently.

"What?" he asks, a mimicry of Hannibal from earlier.

"Oh," Hannibal chuckles. "I suppose it's just *weird* seeing you fed."

"Funny." Will stares at his empty plate and shakes his head. "I might just want to take home leftovers, though."

"If it means you'll eat well," Hannibal says, "I would provide you with as many meals as you asked."

Will purses his lips. "That's really not necessary."

"Then at least allow me to send you home with the leftovers. It would bring me some small comfort."

"Fine," Will replies, though he's definitely not as reluctant as Hannibal thinks he's trying to sound.

It's now that Hannibal begins to gather the dishes, and Will helps him. They clean up together, finishing quickly. When everything is put away, Will stands awkwardly with his arms crossed, evidently unsure of what to do with himself.

"I'm really sorry," he says, flustered.

Hannibal simply tilts his head. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"No, I mean..." Will exhales sharply. "I feel like I've... infringed upon your privacy. Like I've seen a side of you I shouldn't see." He stares at Hannibal, namely at the pajama pants.

"You've seen nothing I am uncomfortable sharing with you," he replies. "I appreciate your company."

Eyebrows raised in an indignant expression, Will crosses his arms. "You're not lying."

"I'm not."

"Usually, people lie about that."

A small pain pierces Hannibal's heart, and he feels compelled to... to hug Will.

It's a silly thing, a ridiculous notion, and he ignores it.

This really is getting out of hand.

"I pity their loss," Hannibal replies. "You're wonderful to be around."

Will looks uncomfortable then, flustered. Hannibal decides that direct compliments are not doing him any good, as he has observed on more than one occasion. He makes a note to be more subtle.

He clears his throat. "I should get dressed."

Will nods, looking past his shoulder at one of the cabinets. "I should get going. I--I don't want to overstay my welcome."

"Nonsense." Hannibal walks over and pats him on the shoulder as he passes. "I'll be ready in a few minutes, and then we can head out to find you a suit."

He's managed to leave the room before Will processes the statement and starts stammering.

"What?" he demands. "Why do I need a suit?"

Hannibal pauses before he ascends the stairs to his suite. Will is standing in the middle of the room, looking mildly upset.

"We did say we needed to make our charade more believable, didn't we?" he hums. "If I'm taking you anywhere, your clothes have to look decent."

He starts walking again before Will has a chance to argue that his suits *are* "decent," even if they both know that's a lie.

"You really don't have anything better to do, do you?"

Will's sat in the front seat of Hannibal's Bentley, looking as if he's folded in on himself. His arms and legs are crossed, and his head is ducked and staring out the window.

"I don't," Hannibal confirms. "The best thing I can do is help you with your case."

"This isn't really help--"

"If you're going to ask for my help, Will, please understand that you will be receiving the *full* extent of my assistance." He pauses, a smile forming. "You'll find I don't *half-ass* things."

Will doesn't react to the curse besides a slight change in posture, the curve of his spine straightening minutely. It's more than enough, however. Not only Hannibal can sense his grin, but he can see it in the reflection of the window he stares out of.

"I guess it's silly to think that you would," Will agrees.

"I'm glad we can agree on that."

"I'll pay you back for the suit, though," he adds, looking up.

Hannibal cocks an eyebrow. "That won't be necessary."

"You don't have to spend money on me, Hannibal. I can buy my own suits."

"I doubt that."

Hannibal says it without judgment, without any ill implications. He leaves the statement to hang in the air until they arrive at the tailor.

The tailor's shop is at the north end of Baltimore, in a quaint peach-colored building. A bay window puts several suits on display, each of a different color and pattern. A small, wooden sign hangs over the door, and the shop's name is painted on it in curly white letters.

Vecellio's Vestments

Hannibal parks directly in front of the front door. Piero's is rarely busy, seeing that it is generally only available with an appointment. However, Hannibal is on friendly terms with Piero and his family, and the man himself owes him a favor or two.

He knows he'll be able to help him with dressing Will.

Hannibal gets out of the car first, and while Will fumbles inadequately with his seatbelt, he takes it upon himself to be a gentleman and open the door for Will. He stares at him with blue eyes as he

gets out, caution and anticipation blooming off of him.

Will hurries past him to get to the front door, and makes an exaggerated gesture of holding it open for Hannibal.

He can't help but smile as he bows his head at Will and enters the shop. He knows the act was sardonic at heart, but it only tells him that there's hope for the horribly-mannered Will Graham.

Open windows let in cold air and natural light, and a breeze passes through the shop as Will shuts the door behind them, rustling the fabric of a half-sewn suit jacket hung on a mannequin.

No one is in the front of the shop at present besides Hannibal and Will, but he knows someone will come to check on them shortly.

Will takes in the shop quietly, noting bolts of silk fabric with quiet curiosity. He reaches out to touch a dark red fabric, feeling it between his fingers.

"See something you like?"

Piero enters the room through a back door, short statured and still striking with his now-silver hair. He's dressed in a pale yellow suit, which serves his tan complexion well.

Will's hand jerks away from the fabric, and he stuffs his hands in his pockets quickly.

"Looks more like something you'd wear," he mutters, glancing at Hannibal.

Piero nods, taking in Hannibal with one glance. "Doctor Lecter," he remarks. "It's wonderful to see you in my shop again."

"It's wonderful to be back." Hannibal smiles at him. Piero is one of the rare individuals in the world that he enjoys speaking with. Piero, blessedly, chooses his words wisely, and doesn't waste time with false compliments or forced sincerity.

"Who's your friend?" Piero asks, nodding at Will, who's standing off to the side like a child that has been told to be 'seen, not heard.'

Hannibal can tell that Will tries his best not to be seen, though the attempt is futile; not much escapes Piero's searching eyes.

Once Will realizes he won't be ignored, he straightens and takes a hand out of his pocket to offer it to Piero.

"Will Graham," he says.

Piero shakes his hand. "Piero Vecellio." He looks at Hannibal, then back at Will. "What brings you two in today?"

Will appears to be searching for an answer, so Hannibal relieves him of the duty by moving to stand next to him, close to him, and place a hand on his shoulder.

"A cause for celebration," he says, looking down at Will through his eyelashes. He does his best to look uncharacteristically smitten, and he's disappointed when he doesn't have to try hard.

It comes naturally when he isn't choking himself trying to suppress it.

A false smile twitches onto Will's face. "Yay," he says, blandly.

Piero looks between the two with raised eyebrows, finally settling on Hannibal with a pointed expression that clearly says, *This is the one you settled on?*

Hannibal smiles, unperturbed, and drops his hand back to his side. "After my relentless pursuit, Will has finally agreed to join me for a night at the Opera. Isn't that right, Will?" he purrs, leaning in closer to Will's ear.

Will takes a long inhale. "It took some convincing."

He still doesn't sound convinced, Hannibal notes dryly.

Regardless, Piero grins, showing off his coffee-stained teeth. "Well, I assume you want to look sharp for the big night?" he asks, wise enough to focus on business instead of personal details.

"Yes," Hannibal confirms. "I would love for Will to have a selection of suits to choose from for when we go out."

Will huffs. "You say that as if there's a chance we'll be going *out* again."

Hannibal ignores the barb. He had hoped Will would be less reluctant to respond to his romantic suggestions publicly, if only for the sake of their cover. Clearly, it isn't going to be so simple.

"There will be," he says, sweetly. "I'll win you over yet, Will Graham."

Will nods, quiet.

Piero smiles, apparently charmed. "I'll be back in a moment," he says. "I think there are a few pieces that would work wonderfully for you, Will." He turns around and quickly hurries into the back room, shouting in Italian at the person still inside.

Once Piero is out of ear shot, Hannibal turns on Will.

He feels aggravated.

"You'll have to be more convincing than *that* if we want this to work," he warns, giving Will a sharp glare.

Will is unaffected. He crosses his arms, and says, "You wanted this to be *believable*, didn't you, Hannibal?"

Hannibal blinks, silenced momentarily. "Yes, but this isn't--"

"Not what you had in mind?" Will cuts him off, tilting his head. "How do you think this would play out if it were real? That I would quickly roll over to your desires and do whatever you asked? That I would be so *willing* to step outside of my comfort zone?"

A moment of consideration on Hannibal's part. "I suppose not," he confesses. Will is stubborn, he knows.

Hannibal is stubborn, too, though. And still, he's fallen victim to his own emotions. He's been forced to act differently, and he only expects the same of Will.

Then again, he thinks, a bit glumly, Will doesn't seem to be experiencing the same feelings as I am.

Will sighs, less aggressive than he was a moment before. Had he seen something in Hannibal?

"Look, Hannibal," he mutters, staring down at the floor, "I'm practically known for being a serial celibate. I'm just playing the part of myself." He shakes his head. "It would be out of character if you took someone new to the ballet opening, right? Well, it's going to look out of character for me if I give in freely to your kind of poncey relationship."

"I suppose so," Hannibal mumbles.

He realizes that he's let his own romantic delusions get to his head. His own desires had convinced him of some sort of fantasy, when clearly, reality is quite different.

Will is still Will, after all.

That does make it better, he thinks, knowing Will intends to act honestly.

He tries not to get his hopes too high when he thinks that it will make it easier to fade the facade into reality.

Piero appears short after, carrying several sample fabrics. His youngest son, Vittore, follows after him with a demure expression. The boy has changed since Hannibal saw him last; he must be at least fourteen years old now, and has grown more than a few inches.

"Have you had your measurements taken before, Will?" Piero asks.

"Ah, no," Will replies, looking hesitantly at the boy who's already begun to appraise him with a trained eye.

"I see." Piero nods at his son. "Take him to the back room, then. You know what to do."

Will looks at Hannibal with wide, bemused eyes before the boy drags him off. Hannibal smirks, knowing that Will needn't fear Vittore, who is the most placid of the Vecellio children.

Once the other two have disappeared into the back room, Piero turns to Hannibal with raised eyebrows. "Next Friday, Doctor Lecter?" he grumbles. "A bit of warning would have been appreciated."

"It was rather last minute," Hannibal confesses. "I hadn't expected Will to agree. But, you know all about eleventh hour requests, don't you?" He passes the tailor something of a devilish expression.

"Yes, I suppose so," Piero sighs. "And we're forever in your debt."

Hannibal hums in agreement. "How *is* Leonara? She hasn't gotten her hands dirty again, has she?"

"No doubt she has," the man mutters. "But she's learned how to clean up after herself. Again, thanks to you." He glances at Hannibal curiously, not for the first time since he stepped in to mend the girl's mistakes.

"Your daughter is not the first patient to show up at my door with blood on her hands," Hannibal replies, keeping his voice low. "She is, however, the first to show up with a supportive family in tow."

Piero chuckles, and Hannibal allows himself a smile. The Vecellio family is a close one, loyal, perhaps to a fault, and he knows he can trust them simply because they have entrusted him with so much.

He is certain that even if they were aware of his own darker natures, they wouldn't be so rude as to betray him for it. Not after everything he's done for them.

"And for that," Piero says, "I can't deny you an under-the-wire request. We'll have a suit ready within the week."

"I thank you," he replies, glancing at the fabrics in Piero's hands. He's selected an array of dark blues and greens--attractive but not too gaudy. Enough to draw eyes towards Will, but not so that he might stand out horrifically.

A compromise, he thinks.

Piero hands him the fabrics to look over. "I can't help but wonder, though," he says, crossing his arms, "why him?"

Hannibal takes a steel blue sample and rubs it between his fingers. A silk-wool blend. "You'll have to be more specific, I'm afraid."

"In all the years I've known you," the tailor replies, "you've never been one to keep a companion."

"Who says Will is my companion?"

"You've already requested for a *selection* of suits for 'future dates,' Doctor Lecter. If that isn't enough to attest to his companionship, might I cite the fact that you've brought Mr. Graham here at all? Or perhaps I should mention the way you look at him, all--"

"Enough, Piero," Hannibal groans. "There's no need to pore over my weaknesses."

He snorts. "You could have anyone, Hannibal. *Anyone*." He rolls his eyes. "And yet, you've chosen an aloof young man with no taste or status--a young man who is clearly reluctant to be joining you at all."

"Your point?"

"You're the psychiatrist, not I," Piero chuckles. "I'm sure you know better what your actions imply."

An hour later, Will's measurements have been taken, and Hannibal has selected a dark emerald wool for the first suit. He pays in advance for three more suits, and Will grumbles continuously about paying Hannibal back.

Hannibal, of course, insists that he won't allow it.

Piero says that he'll have the suit ready in seven days, and he asks that Will come by to pick it up so that they can make any necessary last-minute adjustments.

By the time they're back on the road, Will has slumped into his spot in the front seat, exhausted. He sleeps the twenty minutes it takes to get to Hannibal's house, where Will's car waits.

Hannibal almost doesn't want to let Will leave, almost insists to drive him back to Wolf Trap himself, but he doesn't.

He has to prove to himself he can still show *some* restraint without Will's resistance to enforce it.

Jalousie

Chapter Summary

The word is out.

Chapter Notes

I've currently written ahead to chapter 13. I started writing this on June 25, and I have over 40,000 words. Which means I've written more in the past two weeks than I have in the past year.

Guess I really like writing fan fiction.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Friday feels like a distant point on the horizon the next week.

Hannibal knows he only has to wait a few more days until he can take Will to the opera, but simply the next hour feels like a whole eternity.

This specific hour is a particular struggle to get through.

Franklyn Froideveaux has been in his office for all of ten minutes and Hannibal is already resisting the urge to wring his hands in agitation.

The portly man stares blissfully up at one of the sculptures on the fireplace mantle, muttering about a failed social interaction he'd had earlier in the week when trying to find someone to paint his portrait.

He pauses mid-sentence and then looks at Hannibal, looking somewhat sheepish.

"You know, Doctor Lecter, I haven't been able to get it out of my head," he says, pointing at the black marble carving of a ghost ship. "I've seen that sculpture before."

"Have you?" Hannibal queries, entirely uninterested.

He sincerely doubts that Franklyn has seen it before. He bought it several years ago when he was visiting France. It was on tour at the time, part of an exhibition of artwork belonging to famous Victorian-era serial killers. The sellers had been a crass bunch, but Hannibal had been able to pry the piece out of their unappreciative hands with enough money and proof of connections. What had they called themselves, again?

"The European Crime Collectors," Franklyn says, snapping his fingers as if he has just remembered the name of a childhood friend. "Yes, that was it! I went to see their exhibit in Berlin back in 2008."

He smiles fondly. "I didn't know they sold to private collectors."

Hannibal almost rolls his eyes. Of *course*; it is right up Franklyn's alley. A group of eccentric idiots with no true value of the treasures they hold.

"They don't," Hannibal replies. "I believe I was the exception."

"Fascinating," Franklyn remarks, tilting his head. "But, oh," he laughs, "I wouldn't want to waste our time together. We should be talking about me, right? My neuroses."

"This is your hour, Franklyn," he sighs. "We can spend it discussing whatever you like."

"True," mutters Franklyn. "But, you know," he says, lifting his brows, "it makes me sad, that we only have *this* hour together, once a week. It makes me sad that I have to pay to talk to you, a kindred spirit." He lets out a long exhale, as if expecting a response.

When Hannibal says nothing, he continues.

"I'd love to see you outside of this office, Doctor Lecter. Then, we could talk about art and culture without the time constraints of appointments."

There it is, Hannibal thinks. The hidden obsession is revealed at last. His lips curling into a frown, he answers, "I'm afraid I must keep my relations with my patients strictly professional, Franklyn. Our meetings will remain in this office."

Franklyn moans, turning his head to the side, woeful. "I thought you'd say that. And it's not *fair*. I just want to spend time with you! I want to get to *know* you."

Hannibal shifts in his seat, somewhat uncomfortable. Of course, this is not the first time he suspected Franklyn's obsession, and he certainly knows how to deal with such a situation. He rationalizes that, for now, he'll have to sit through the rest of the session and play the good psychiatrist, doing his best to dissuade his homely patient from crossing any boundaries.

"It's understandable," he responds, resting a hand on the arm of the chair and tapping a finger. "You confide in me. I know many things about you, more than most. But it is important, Franklyn, to remember that I am your source of stability, not your friend."

"Friends can provide stability," pouts Franklyn, seeming aggravated now. "We could be there for each other, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal swallows, forcing a patient smile. "I have my own support systems, Franklyn. It's important that you develop your own outside of my office."

He tries not to compare the conversation to one he had with Will in the same office, only the sides reversed.

"Sure," Franklyn mutters. "Except that people don't *like* me. They don't want to spend time with me! I have to *pay* to get someone to talk to me!"

Blinking, Hannibal nods. "Patience is key, Franklyn. Tell me, do you really feel so alone?"

"No." Franklyn's voice has shrunk--quiet, dejected. "Well, sometimes. But, I do have *one* friend, Tobias..."

Successfully distracted, Franklyn spends the rest of the session babbling about his 'best friend' like he would a lover. Hannibal does his best not to press the topic, but can't help but feel pity for the poor man. Not a kind pity, though. A cold one.

In his younger days, Hannibal, too, sought desperately for a kindred spirit. He had long since decided he didn't need one, that he was fine alone in the world.

And then, of course, he met Will.

A kindred spirit in unexpected ways, and perhaps a reluctant one at that.

All in due time, he thinks. Patience is key.

He knows he can woo Will before it's too late for the both of them.

And if it comes to be too late, then he's fairly certain of what he has to do. He does not want to consider it, but he knows he must be prepared.

He spends the rest of the hour only half-listening, his head occupied with thoughts of someone else.

Franklyn takes his time heading out the door, clinging to any scraps of conversation he thinks he can salvage. Hannibal has to usher him out, lying that he has another patient whose appointment should be starting in just another minute.

Reluctantly, Franklyn exits, only to bump into Will Graham as he enters the waiting room.

Will does not have Wednesday appointments, but Hannibal is elated to see him all the same. He tries to not let that joy be curbed by the realization that Will's exhausted visage has returned to him, the energy and mirth of the previous week long since dissipated.

"Will," he hums, stepping into the waiting room to greet him. He wants to frown at the hunch of his shoulders, the tension visible in his entire body, but remains neutral.

Will looks nervously at Franklyn, who's staring at him with wide, curious eyes. He looks to Hannibal, and, carefully, says, "Doctor Lecter."

Franklyn looks between the two of them, clearly all agog to see what he surely thinks is another one of Hannibal's patients. But when he opens his mouth, he doesn't say what Hannibal expects him to.

"You're Will Graham."

Will purses his lips. "That's me," he confirms, casting a wary glance.

"You're the one from all those *TattleCrime* articles."

At that, Will grimaces, and Hannibal feels compelled to step in. Will is already doing poorly, and he does not need a tactless fool like Franklyn to induce any further anxieties.

"Have a good day, Franklyn," he says, more of an order than a well-wishing.

"You too, Doctor Lecter," the man says curtly, likely miffed for being chased off so soon. He takes a long look at Will. "And you too, Mr. Graham. Hopefully we'll run into each other again sometime."

With that, Franklyn hurries out the door, leaving a strange feeling in the air behind him. Once he's gone, Hannibal notices the bag that Will carries, the scent of Piero's shop with it.

"You picked up your suit," he remarks.

Will looks confused for a moment, before he looks down as if just remembering the bag. "Oh, yeah," he says. "I did. Still have to pay you back for that."

"You will do no such thing!" exclaims Hannibal. "I insisted on purchasing them."

"Right," he grumbles. "It's more *believable* that way, too, I guess."

Hannibal smiles. "There you go." He looks at the bag. "May I?" he inquires.

"Oh, yeah. Sure." Will passes it to him.

Hannibal peers inside. The bag only has a neatly folded tie and a few variously colored dress shirts.

"The, uh, suit's hung up in a plastic cover in my car," Will answers. "I've kind of been carrying this all day, I think. Everything's been kind of a blur."

He passes the bag back to Will. "A hard day teaching at Quantico?"

"No." Will frowns and loses himself for a moment, wandering somewhere else. He looks up and clarifies, "A hard day at a crime scene. The Egalitarian left us another body to check out."

"Then his killings have become a weekly occurrence."

"Seems like it," Will sighs.

Hannibal nods, concern and a familiar pang of jealousy blooming inside of him. Will's thought are no doubt preoccupied with the Egalitarian, an unworthy, unappreciative recipient of his attention, and it's weighing him down.

So much energy wasted on someone so unworthy. If Will ever has to suffer, Hannibal thinks, he should suffer for something beneficial.

"Would you like to join me in the office?" he asks, clearing his thoughts. "I know it's not our appointment time, but--"

"We don't have an appointment anymore, Hannibal," Will tells him, smiling wryly.

"Don't we?"

"I talked to Jack again today," he explains. "We agreed it would make more sense if I didn't... hang out at your office." He pulls a face, and it only exaggerates his fatigue. "It would be nice to avoid running into any more of your curious patients, after all."

Hannibal forces a smile. "Don't mind Franklyn."

"It's never nice to meet a fan."

Then, the smile relaxes, becoming natural, *fond*. "Then what brings you here, Will, if not to 'hang out?'"

Will's expression stills for a moment. "Work," he says, hesitant.

Even the mention of it is enough to bring him down, Hannibal notes.

"How can I help, Will?" Surely, there's something he can do to help relieve his stress. Fleeting, he is distracted by the thought of digging his hands into Will's back and shoulders, massaging out any tension, filling Will with thoughts reserved only for...

"Nothing, actually," Will says, interrupting Hannibal's thoughts. "I just wanted to check in."

"How sweet," he intones, pleased with the response. "You play the role of a dutiful lover so well."

Will grimaces. "Yeah, sure. Let them think that." He scratches nervously at the back of his head, staring just below Hannibal's eyes. "No, I'm here because the newest victim looks like he could be your... your match. For the lack of a better word."

Hannibal rolls his shoulders, sighing. "My match? How so?" He couldn't care less, in all honesty. The Egalitarian doesn't frighten him; his only concerns lie with the weight that Jack Crawford forces Will to bear in his pursuit of the killer.

"Well, you know. The victim fits your profile. Tall, foreign, broad shoulders, brown hair. Found him in a park bathroom; choked to death on something."

"An undignified way to die," Hannibal mutters, briefly distracted. "I hope the Egalitarian doesn't plan to kill me the same way."

Will smiles wryly. "I'm guessing you have a more noble death planned out for yourself."

Hannibal nods. He has always enjoyed the idea of dying at sea, or even peacefully in his own bed. But choking? In a *public restroom*? The thought is vile to him. "I plan to live a while longer," he answers, swallowing the bitter taste in his mouth.

"Well, good," mutters Will, and he glances up to meet Hannibal's eyes briefly. "Jack's planning to keep an eye on you, just to make sure no one tries to bogeyman you. Thought you'd like to know."

Hannibal nods, holding the eye contact. The thought of Jack Crawford watching him over his shoulder is less than appealing. "I'm grateful for the forewarning," he replies.

He supposes that he won't be able to hunt until the threat has passed, however, and that is dismaying.

"He's putting a detail out for everyone that donated to the ballet thing," Will adds, breaking their gaze. "It's all we've got."

"A pity you can't secure the lives of their counterparts." He imagines that no one can be pleased with that.

Will's frown deepens until it seems to encompass his entire face. "Yeah," he mumbles. He crosses his arm and, once again, his expression hints that his mind is elsewhere.

"Will?" Hannibal presses. "What do you see?"

Will shakes his head and comes back to. "Nothing," he grumbles. "Just--whatever point he's trying to make, I think this is just making it worse." Before Hannibal can ask him to elaborate, he continues, absently running a hand through his curls. "He's trying to bring them together when he kills them. Pointing out that money couldn't save the rich ones from dying like their parallels." He scowls. "But we're disrupting that message."

"By only saving the more prominent halves," Hannibal supplies.

Will sighs. "Yeah. But it's all we can do, so... it's the right thing."

Hannibal sees the conflict inside of him, sees that he's reached that *point*. The point where he starts to understand the killer he hunts on a new level, where he lets them into his mind.

Something clenches inside of Hannibal--his new friend, jealousy.

"I should go," Will says, under his breath. "I--I think I need a coffee or something."

He does. It's clear that his period of rest didn't last long, and the pills were not successful in restoring his circadian rhythm. Sleeplessness lines his face--yet another reminder of his preoccupation with the Egalitarian.

"Allow me to join you," Hannibal says, stepping forward as Will goes to exit. He supposes the company would be beneficial to both parties, as well as their newfound mutual cause.

Will looks up. "What?"

Hannibal simpers, but it goes unnoticed. "I'm asking if you'll let me join you for coffee."

"You do realize I'm probably just going to go to a Starbucks, right? I'm not headed anywhere nice." He blinks at Hannibal, incredulous.

"I'm aware," he replies, entertained by Will's reaction. "I don't have anywhere better to be, wouldn't you say? I ought to go somewhere the Egalitarian won't look for me, and by joining you, I can also work on this little charade of ours."

Will shrugs. "Sure," he says. "But I'm paying."

"If you insist."

Hannibal doesn't even realize his giddy smile until he finds himself in Will's car, driving to a commercial, low-end coffee chain.

The ride is short, but long enough for Hannibal's legs to cramp unpleasantly. Will's car is not comfortable in the slightest; the seats are covered in dog hair, and the car's scent matches.

But it's also a strong reflection of Will, and despite it all, Hannibal enjoys that. He wonders where he drives it when he's not working, what adventures he takes his pack on.

They pass by the only Starbucks Hannibal can remember, but he doesn't say anything about it. Will turns off of the main road and takes a few turns until they're deep into a neighborhood full of townhouses.

This arouses concern in him. "Do you know where you're going, Will?" he asks, frowning as they pass a middle school.

"Not entirely," Will confesses, glancing at him from the corner of his eye. His breathing has accelerated some.

"That's comforting." Hannibal shifts, trying to find a way to actually straighten his back. He notes Will's own rigid posture, the way he chews on the inside of his cheek. "Is there a reason why you seem anxious, Will?"

"Don't worry about it," he replies, slowing the vehicle as he makes another turn. "Not anxious. Someone's just following us."

Hannibal immediately tenses and looks at the rear view mirror, where he sees a red car trailing a short distance behind them.

"Is that Freddie Lounds' car?" he asks, rhetorically. He would recognize it anywhere; the woman has a horrible habit of showing up wherever she's least welcome.

"Yes," answers Will, jaw clenched. "Doesn't make me feel much better, though. I've got a bone to pick with that woman." He makes a quick left and then another, but Lounds is still right behind. "I'm pretty sure she's been following since I was at your office--if not earlier."

"Someone has a crush," Hannibal mutters. Part of him wishes Will didn't attract so much attention, but he does realize that it's really half of the fun.

Will's lip curls as he checks the rear-view again. "Wouldn't call it that. Maybe a sick infatuation."

Hannibal nods; Lounds' interest in Will is more than just a passing crush. She has been on his case for a long time. "You're wasting time, all the same," he continues. "Lounds is insatiable. You won't be able to chase her off."

"So I should just carry on like normal?" scoffs Will.

"Yes," confirms Hannibal. A visit with Lounds wouldn't be entirely unfavorable, he thinks. Closer to the main street, now, they're approaching a line of businesses. He sees a little brick building with a sign that reads *Cafe*. "Pull over here."

Will makes an annoyed sound, but stops anyway. His parking job is poor, angled away from the curb by several degrees. He gets out and slams his door, but makes a mock effort of opening Hannibal's for him.

"Returning the favor," he grits, when Hannibal looks at him curiously.

They walk into the building side by side, and Will quickly takes them to the farthest corner facing the door. Secluded, quiet.

Before Hannibal can even take off his coat, Freddie Lounds enters, a large black sun hat shielding her face entirely from view. She's a hard one to miss, however; her abundance of red curls is

impossible to forget, and her tight purple pants don't exactly go unnoticed.

He regards her bitterly, and shrugs his coat off onto his seat.

"Why don't you order drinks, Will?" he suggests, his gaze trained on the reporter. "I'll keep our friend occupied."

"Sure," sighs Will. "Move fast, though. She's spotted me."

Hannibal hurries to keep Lounds away from Will, and succeeds, intercepting her as Will approaches the counter. He watches out of the corner of his eye as he shifts on his feet to read the menu, likely pretending not to notice Lounds.

Hannibal's attention turns to her as she clears her throat and makes eye contact. "Doctor Lecter," she intones, feigning surprise. "I didn't expect to find you here."

"No?" he asks, tilting his head. "You followed us all the way from my office, and you didn't imagine we would end up at the same destination?"

Her lips tighten almost imperceptibly. "I hadn't realized you were in Will Graham's car," she replies.

"Your mistake, then." He wonders how long she had been trailing Will, just to have not seen Hannibal get in his car. He supposes, however, that it's much more likely that she's lying. As dreadful as she is, Lounds has never been part of nefarious conspiracies.

She smiles, then. "Is it?" She tilts her head, her face the picture of morbid curiosity. "Because I suddenly feel quite lucky. I would *love* to know what you're doing out and about with my favorite criminal profiler."

Of course you would.

"We thought we would go out for coffee," he responds, smiling.

"Mmm." She nods, tapping her pen against her jawline. "Neither of you really seem to be the coffee date type, though. What's the deal, Doctor?"

"Perhaps this is an exception."

Lounds narrows her eyes. "Is this about the case?" she asks, and her eyes light when she notices the (intentional) tightening of Hannibal's expression. "I thought so," she says. "I got a glimpse of the crime scene, you see. The victim there looked a lot like you." There's a lilt in her voice, too cheery.

"I was informed."

"Are you in danger, Doctor Lecter?" she inquires. Her eyes travel over to Will, almost hungrily, who's fumbling to order something at the counter. "And do you really feel safe in the hands of *that* psychopath?"

He clenches his jaw in response to the animosity in her tone. "Will is not a psychopath."

"Oh, and you'd know," Lounds laughs. "You're his psychiatrist."

Hannibal bites the inside of his cheek. He sees potential in the conversation, so long as he plays it carefully. The tabloid reporter would be the *perfect* way to spread rumors about his relationship with Will, seeing as her fanbase was so actively interested in him.

"He's not my patient," says Hannibal. "That would be messy, after all."

"Would it?"

He can see the gears turning behind her greedy little eyes.

"Yes," he hums, glancing over at Will. He makes a show of watching as Will leans over to take their drinks, but without much satisfaction. Will's pants are too ill-fitting around the rear to merit a salacious stare. "My interests in Will are far too personal to lend themselves to a strictly professional relationship."

He sees that he's piqued her curiosity, and before she can ask anything more, he takes delight in snatching it away from her.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," he says, "I have a *coffee date*, as you put it." He hurries over to Will, and he feels her gaze boring into his back. She doesn't approach, however, lingering by the door.

They sit back down, and Will stirs at his coffee with a spoon. It's black, but Hannibal can smell the sugar mixed into it.

"I got you a plain cappuccino," he mutters. "Seemed obnoxiously European, so I figured it would be a good fit."

Hannibal takes the drink and observe it. The coffee beans smell stale, and the milk is nonfat, forgoing flavor and quality in favor of foam. It's mediocre at best, but the attempt is there.

"A fair decision. Thank you, Will."

Will turns his head to survey the now-empty cafe, watching from the window as Lounds sashays back to her car. "How'd you get her to scram like that?" he asks, raising his mug to his lips. It's barely steaming, but he still winces from the heat.

"I told her enough to interest her, but not enough for her to write a story."

Will exhales sharply though his nose, disturbing the surface of his coffee. He quickly sets the drink down. "You gave her something? Hannibal, she doesn't need much. Whatever you told her, she's going to blow it out of proportion."

"In our favor, most likely," he replies.

"What did you tell her?"

Hannibal takes a sip of his drink and doesn't answer the question. He supposes they'll see what story Lounds spins very soon.

Early Friday morning, Hannibal opens up his web browser to look at *TattleCrime*.

Unsurprisingly, Freddie Lounds had uploaded her article just minutes before. Hannibal is well accustomed to her posting schedule.

TATTLECRIME.COM

Freddie Lounds

BEYOND A "PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP"



exclusive!

Article:

Has Will Graham gone too far?

The unofficial FBI crime profiler has been known to test moral boundaries in his work, so it's no wonder to see him pushing them in his personal life, as well.

Graham is prized by the FBI for being able to get into killers' heads, thanks to his own personal brand of psychopathy. Could it be

that Graham, in a twisted attempt to pass psych evaluations, has seduced his psychiatrist?

Avid Tattlers will know that Will Graham has been seeing Dr. Hannibal Lecter professionally ever since he was tasked to capture (and later, kill) the Minnesota Shrike. Just this past Wednesday, Graham was spotted out having coffee with this Lecter, and it was by no means under *professional* terms. *Click to read more!*

Hannibal doesn't even bother to read the entire thing.

Lounds, it appears, is under the impression that Will has seduced him for the sake of passing his psychological evaluation. Ridiculous, Hannibal thinks, because he signed that off months ago.

Still, her headline, while vague, is enough to turn heads. She certainly doesn't have enough information to prove anything, but she has helped them plant the seeds of speculation.

Hannibal starts his day in a good mood, ready for his evening to come.

Will arrives at his door at five o'clock. He's wearing the dark green suit Hannibal selected with a gray shirt underneath. His tie is black pinstripe, and he's tied it boldly with a trinity knot.

His surprise must show as soon as he's opened the door, because Will scowls at him.

"Piero showed me how to do it," he snaps, in way of an explanation.

"I like it."

Will rolls his eyes, shrugging off the compliment. "You like everything overdone."

"Not my food," Hannibal reminds him.

"Pretentious as ever, Doctor Lecter."

"I appreciate quality," replies Hannibal. "Shoot me."

Will smirks. "Was that *sarcasm*?"

"Let's hope so. A will to live is an essential part of mental well being."

"So you haven't been chatting with the Egalitarian?" His eyes are wide and bright, his chin slightly tucked.

"It would be in poor taste," Hannibal hums. He sweeps his gaze over Will once more, taking in the sight of him. He looks better rested, albeit not as well as he did earlier in the week, and the suit is appealing.

The pants cling well to his thighs, hinting at some musculature, and Hannibal is eager to catch a glimpse of their fit from behind. The jacket helps Will's narrow figure, focusing on his slim hips instead of accentuating the lack of broad shoulders.

And the color certainly fits Will's skin tone, he thinks. His eyes return to Will's face, and he notes that Will's stubble has been freshly trimmed, but of course not removed. He doesn't mind the lack of a clean-shaven look, anyhow. Will's hair is as untamed as usual, but it's charming.

Hannibal finds himself smiling, imagining carding his fingers through the wild locks.

"Well," Will coughs, ducking under Hannibal's regard, "we should get going. I believe we have a date."

"Indeed," Hannibal replies, setting his wanton thoughts aside. "We're taking my car this time, I hope you know."

"I assumed."

They arrive at the opera house only a few minutes early. Ordinarily, Hannibal would arrive at least a half hour in advance, but he senses that Will doesn't want to stick around for any longer than necessary.

They will have to socialize after the performance.

The lounge is dotted with other patrons, sipping champagne and gossiping about friends and neighbors, not wont to take their seats until the last minute. Will immediately tenses when they enter the room, and as if by instinct, begins to cling to Hannibal.

Good, he thinks.

"We'll go straight to our seats," Hannibal promises him, leaning down to whisper in his ear.

Will thanks him quietly, and Hannibal takes him by the arm. They earn a few curious glances, but it's no one that he recognizes. The people he associates with will have already seated themselves, being such avid fans of the opera.

Hannibal keeps a light grip on Will's arm as they walk down the main aisle, and he's unwilling to let go when they finally sit. He keeps his hand there for a moment longer than necessary, and then retreats into his own lap.

Once they're in place, he looks around discreetly for familiar faces.

Julia Komeda in the front row, Peoria Williams down to his right, Alan Fellings to the left. A quick glance over his shoulder sends a jab of irritation through him as he spots Franklyn Froideveaux.

Will must feel him stiffen. Whispering, he asks, "What is it?"

"Nothing," Hannibal assures him. "Someone to be ignored."

Will nods, and a moment later, the performance begins.

Lenora sings with heart and force; the beauty in her voice, story, and appearance bring Hannibal to tears, and he is the first to stand to applause when it's over.

He barely notices Will beside him, or Franklyn watching him obsessively, and when Will rises to stand next to him in applause, another surge of emotion overcomes him.

What a beautiful evening.

The applause dies before there's been enough of it, and he reluctantly leaves his seat, taking Will by the arm again. He plans to linger in the hall to attract attention, but he doesn't need to. Mrs. Komeda approaches him immediately, smiling fervently.

"Hannibal!" she exclaims, catching them before they've even left their row. "Oh, wasn't it a *lovely* performance?"

He smiles in greeting, grateful for the attention. "Indeed it was," he replies, and glances at Will, his gaze catching on his rear. He was right to assume the fit would be excellent there, as well. "Didn't you think, Will?" he inquires, squeezing his arm.

Will passes a wary glance over the room before addressing her. "I'm not one for opera," he confesses, "but she certainly has a beautiful voice." He keeps his gaze trained on Hannibal, avoiding Mrs. Komeda.

As they move to the more open space, she trails after them. "And who is *this* delightful creature, Hannibal? I don't think I've seen you with him before."

Hannibal smiles, moving to place his hand on the small of Will's back when they settle on a place to stand. "This is Will Graham," he tells her, giving him a fond expression. It's a fine feeling, to be the one introducing him, to be the only one in the room to be able to claim familiarity with his scintillating eyes, his matchless mind.

She doesn't look at all satisfied with the answer, and turns her gaze intently on Will. "How do you know Hannibal, Will?"

Will's smile is hesitant, his gaze flitting to her for just a second. "Work," he replies curtly.

Hannibal nods; it's a vague cover that they've agreed on. He also sticks to a similar narrative to the one he shared with Piero.

"I've been pursuing him since the beginning," he murmurs, lowering his face towards Will's, "and he's only just agreed to accompany me for an evening together."

His nose hovers just above Will's ear. He can smell his bitter aftershave and his commercial shampoo, but it doesn't bother him so much. He smiles and meets Will's eyes, which are narrowed at him, but making contact all the same.

"Oh, *lovely*," Mrs. Komeda sighs, clasping her hands together. "And isn't he wonderful, Will? Many would argue that you're the luckiest person in the room."

Once again, Will provides a forced smile, looking away from Hannibal. "He certainly is an excellent cook," he offers lamely.

Hannibal almost groans, thinking that Will's pushing the reluctance bit a little too hard.

"He certainly is," she agrees, practically swooning. "Watching him prepare the food is a show in itself!" She looks at Hannibal and bats her eyelashes, hopeful. "Though I've nearly *forgotten* what it's like, it's been so long since you've hosted a dinner party."

"Well," Hannibal chuckles, "I'm sure the inspiration to do so will come soon."

Especially with Will around. The desire to put on a fine display fills him; the need to have Will's mind trained on him, the Ripper, and no one else, is overpowering.

He's touched with an idea, a romantic kill. Uncharacteristic, certainly, but it's a warranted change.

Mrs. Komeda sighs again, clearly sold. She looks over their shoulders and tuts. "Oh, but Hannibal," she says, "I believe someone is trying to get your attention."

Hannibal takes a long inhale before he turns, knowing fully well who waits behind him.

Franklyn stands close, an eager expression plastered on his dozy face. The thousand yard stare he's kept on Hannibal throughout the evening persists. Another man stands several feet behind him, tall and imposing. Tobias, presumably.

"Doctor Lecter," Franklyn says, his beady eyes flicking over to Will, coveting. "What a surprise to see you here with another patient. I thought you said you only kept professional relationships."

The comment isn't unforeseen, though it comes sooner than Hannibal had expected. He feels a hot coil of anger clench within him, calming it quickly. The opera is no place for rage, after all. He has better use of his energy than blind agitation, and he intends to use it against his dull-witted patient.

Hannibal smiles, his expression naive and besotted as he glances at his date. "Oh, Will?" He laughs as he moves his hand to curl around Will's hip. "He isn't my patient, Franklyn."

Franklyn frowns, fixating on the position of Hannibal's hand, clearly confused. "I saw him at your office a few days ago. And a few times before, too."

Will casts Hannibal a rude side-eye and then focuses on Franklyn.

"Hannibal helps me sort through my cases. I visit his office casually," he explains, shoving his hands into the pockets of his suit jacket. He shifts under Hannibal's hold, but doesn't try to pull free.

"He keeps me company," Hannibal purrs, tightening his grip.

The comment makes both Will and Franklyn uncomfortable, but Mrs. Komeda laughs in delight. "Oh, Hannibal, I'm so happy you've found yourself someone. It was high time." She looks across the room wistfully. "And I must return to *my* someone," she announces. "Do let me know when you host your next party, Hannibal. I would love to see both you and Will again."

"Of course, Mrs. Komeda," he replies. "Your company is always welcome."

She waves goodbye and hurries to rejoin her husband, surely to recount to him her thoughts on Hannibal's new beau.

That leaves him and Will facing a lonely Franklyn, who plainly is hurt by being the only one *not* welcome at Hannibal's table. The man behind him, presumably Tobias, steps forward to rescue his friend.

Or, to drown him, Hannibal thinks, noting the cruelly amused expression on his face.

"You must be the famous Doctor Lecter," he says, standing beside Franklyn. "I've heard so much about you." A cold light glimmers behind his eyes as he considers Will, head to toe. "In fact," he chuckles, "I think Franklyn was more focused on you and your date than the actual performance." His lips curl into a distasteful smile as he meets eyes with Hannibal.

Hannibal decides that Franklyn's friend is just as bad as he is.

"And you must be Tobias."

"Yes," Franklyn says feebly, meeker than he was just a minute ago. "My good friend, Tobias."

"And Will Graham," Tobias adds, nodding at Will. "I've certainly read about *you*. Just this morning, there was another article, wasn't there?"

Ah, yes, Hannibal thinks. Lounds' article, surely, has made the rounds by now.

Will shifts, leaning into Hannibal slightly to nudge him. "Was there?" he asks, glancing disdainfully at Hannibal. "I hadn't read it. But Freddie Lounds is a sensationalist. She'll blow anything out of proportion, so take her word with a whole handful of salt."

"Meaning you're not a psychopath sleeping his way to sanity," Tobias provides.

Will blinks, apparently taken aback by the remark. "Obviously."

Laughing nervously, Franklyn cuts in. "And Doctor Lecter was never your psychiatrist? Not like the article said?"

"Not officially," Will grumbles.

"Or in any capacity," Hannibal adds, and he removes his hand from Will's hip to take him by the arm once more. "Now, gentlemen, if you excuse us..."

He trails off, and abandoning his ordinary etiquette, he begins pulling Will away before Franklyn can object. He is very aware of his ability to stretch and prolong conversations, and Hannibal doesn't want to waste anymore time on someone he couldn't care less about.

Once they're out of earshot, Will breaks away from him and snatches a glass of champagne from the nearest passing waiter.

He downs the entire glass in one go, and lets out an exhale when he finishes. "This is pushing it, Hannibal."

Hannibal agrees, of course, but likely on a different level.

"Not everyone is as prying as Franklyn," he promises. He hopes future evenings won't be disturbed by him.

"He's a jealous creature," Will murmurs, staring at the empty flute. "But you didn't have to be so handsy in front of him. He *wants* you, and you weren't helping any."

Hannibal's skin crawls at the thought.

"Well," he says, "it would appear I'm safe from him, because for the time being, I have *you*."

"You're enjoying this way too much," Will mutters, a warning in his tone. "Don't get too into it, or I might be worried you're falling in love with me."

The comment is clearly teasing, but Hannibal still falters a moment. He clears his throat. "Leave your concerns to the people we're trying to convince, Will."

"Yeah." Will's gaze skitters across the room. "Now, I don't think we'll spot our guy here," he says. "The word's out, so can we leave?"

He resists the urge to tease Will for being so eager, but presumes it wouldn't be welcome. Will's thoughts are likely not aligned with Hannibal's own.

"Allow me to introduce you to one or two more people, and we'll be on our way."

"I'm taking advantage of the champagne, then."

It's a fair trade, Hannibal thinks.

Though, by the time they leave, he finds himself disappointed that Will has scavenged enough hors d'oeuvres that he can't rightfully invite him to stay for dinner.

Hopefully, next time, Will won't spoil his appetite.

Chapter End Notes

Long chapter! I hope you don't mind. I think I like these longer chapters, though. It was easy to fit one emotion into all of it, too.

I tried my hand at multimedia by creating a TattleCrime article. You ever get an idea at 11pm and stay up until 3am and realize it was a bad idea, but you put too much effort in to throw it out? Yeah.

Paix

Chapter Summary

Honestly, Will just needs a shit ton of TLC.

Chapter Notes

A little bit of canon-typical violence in the first part of this chapter, including needles and choking. Just a heads up!

And just so you know, it's been some time since I've written gore, so it is lacking in detail and general oomph.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Egalitarian is still at large, and so is the Copycat.

Hannibal hadn't ever *fully* intended to kill under that alias again. The first time, when he mimicked Garret Jacob Hobbes, he only wanted to give Will a glimpse of what was really there.

Now, instead of attracting Will's attention towards the actual killer, he wants to divert it. He wants Will to look at *him*, to see *him*, even if he doesn't comprehend fully yet.

No FBI security detail haunts Hannibal's house tonight; he managed to convince Jack that he would be safe enough on his own the day before. The agent was reluctant, of course, but Hannibal insisted.

He needs his space, and now that he has it, he plans to hunt.

In the time he's had since the Egalitarian's last kill and his night out with Will, he's managed to do enough research to determine a suitable counterpart to his dead lookalike. A man named Johann Nolak fits the bill well enough.

A Polish immigrant of some stature, he didn't actually donate to the reopening of the ballet theatre. Instead, his connection is through his daughter, who is one of the lead performers in the opening production of *La Bayadère*. The link is still there, but with enough of a difference to distinguish it as the work of the Copycat.

As far as his resemblance to Hannibal, Nolak is around the same height and weight, though of a different build. They share the brown hair and eyes, as well, and altogether, it's enough to tie them together.

Hannibal doesn't think there's any resemblance beyond that, however.

Nolak lives in a modest house just outside of town, isolated for at least a half-mile in every direction. He is divorced, and his daughter lives with her partner closer to downtown, making him, effectively, a sitting duck.

At five thirty, when the sun has already set and it's an appropriate time to leave home, Hannibal drives to the location where he keeps his other vehicle. He dons his vinyl kill suit, pulls on his gloves, and packs his cooler full of ice, not forgetting his surgical equipment.

From there, he heads to Nolak's home. It's a short drive.

Only the kitchen light is on when Hannibal arrives, a careless tribute to a life lived alone.

He sneaks in through a back window without much effort, into the living room. It smells of cheap white wine and unchanged cat litter. The light from the kitchen seeps in, illuminating the unconscious face of Johann Nolak. The pitiful man is passed out on his sofa, a plate of half-eaten pasta on his lap. His cell phone rests face-up next to an empty wine bottle on the coffee table in front of him, quietly playing an old jazz instrumental.

Hannibal is quick with his work.

He's brought with him a syringe containing a mixture of water and powdered arsenic, which he's ascertained to be the Egalitarian's method. Will hasn't told him, namely because he hasn't asked, but given his knowledge, it makes the most sense.

Once in the bloodstream, the poison will spread to the rest of the body where it will corrode the system as a whole, without the messy gastroenteritis merited from consuming it orally.

After a lifetime of practice, Hannibal has perfected the use of the needle. He's able to inject the mixture into the vein at the crook of Nolak's arm without any resistance or 'rolling veins.'

(There's no such thing as rolling veins, he knows, only poorly aimed needles.)

The man doesn't even stir as the poison enters his system, but Hannibal knows the effects will be setting in soon. If he's right, Nolak won't have a chance to struggle before his body goes into shock and fails him.

That means Hannibal doesn't have much time.

Without fear of waking Nolak, because he will hardly be able to struggle or cry under Hannibal's strength, he carefully opens the cooler he's brought with him. He takes out a large cube of ice from within, and then uses a pair of forceps to lodge it in Nolak's throat.

While Hannibal forces it in, Nolak wakes, and his eyes go wide as he starts to thrash.

Hannibal remains calm, and uses an elbow to lean on Nolak, effectively pinning him down. He continues to set the ice in the man's throat, and when it's properly caught, he removes the forceps.

Nolak convulses as he loses oxygen and the poison begins to override his system, and his eyes roll back into his head. Hannibal doesn't need to pin him down anymore.

Still calm, unaffected, he replaces the forceps and retrieves his scalpel.

Unappealing gurgling sounds come from Nolak as he struggles in vain. He can't make much use of his vocal cords with the ice stuck in his throat, but he tries.

"Oh, Johann," Hannibal sighs. He supposes it's a good thing he won't be eating this man; between the stress of his death and the poison inside of him, the meat would surely be tainted.

Still, Hannibal plans to take a piece of Nolak with him. He's brought the necessary equipment with him, and he *will* take a trophy. He's long considered feeding tongue to Jack Crawford, and his chance is now. He knows Jack won't be able to taste the fear in the meat; not like Hannibal can.

He will make Jack eat his words, in a sense. Show him what happens when he speaks poorly of Will.

And, in another way, thank him for his gift, for bringing Will closer to him. Nothing shows gratitude like a home-cooked meal, after all.

He smiles as he cuts out Nolak's tongue.

When everything is cleaned and returned to its proper location, the crime scene having been set, it's not even eight o'clock.

Nolan's tongue is in the back of Hannibal's Bentley, in the cooler. It's safe there, for at least a few hours, and seeing that the night went well, he doesn't see any harm in carrying out the rest of his evening plans.

He drives to Wolf Trap, Virginia, with a basket he put together earlier in the front seat. He arrives at Will's house shortly past nine.

Will's pack of dogs all bark upon his arrival, running from around the back to surround his car. Will appears shortly after, looking disgruntled and all bundled up in one of his muted sweaters. He raises one hand to shield his eyes from Hannibal's headlights, and he quickly shuts off the engine.

When he opens the door and steps out, he's greeted by a handful of inquisitive noses and tongues.

He wonders if the dogs can smell where he's been.

He greets them before Will, kneeling down so they can sniff him and lick at his hands. He scratches at a few of them, unable to manage them all at once.

One of the larger ones takes it upon himself to search Hannibal for the sausage they've likely come to associate him with, and he has to gently prod the dog away.

"Hey, hey," Will tuts at the pack. "Come on, everyone. Give him his space."

Hannibal stands, brushing himself off. "I don't mind," he replies, as the dogs scatter once more in several different directions.

"I doubt that," Will says, his presumably skeptical expression hidden in the darkness. "Your suit probably costs more than a lifetime of grooming supplies."

He nods, certain that it's true, but otherwise doesn't confirm the statement.

"What are you doing here, Hannibal? It's late."

Hannibal gives him a coy smile then, and shrugs. "We have another social function to attend this week," he says. "I want to ensure that you're well rested beforehand."

"So you show up at my house when I should otherwise be sleeping?"

"I knew you wouldn't be sleeping, Will."

He hears Will sigh in agreement.

"True," he exhales. "I just got back from walking them a few minutes before you pulled up."

"My timing is excellent, then."

"Yeah." Will's figure shifts, a silhouette against the light of the house behind him. "Do you, ah, want to come inside? Or is this just a quick check-in?"

"It's a long drive. A moment inside would be rewarding."

"Mm. Come on, then."

Will turns and heads off to the house, and Hannibal ducks into his car to retrieve the basket he brought. He follows after, and Will doesn't see what he carries until they're at the front door, illuminated by the porch light.

He looks over his shoulder as he fumbles to open the door, spotting the basket. "For fuck's sake, Hannibal." His fingers stall as his gaze fixates on the green bow tying the entire thing together.

Hannibal ignores his disconcerting comment and hands him the basket, taking it upon himself to open the unlocked door. He holds it open for the dogs, who all file in quickly. Will stands still, holding the basket as if he's just been handed an enormous lump of coal.

"Shall we enter?" Hannibal asks him.

Will groans. "Sure."

He leads Hannibal into the kitchen, past the disarrayed main room. Will's bed there is unmade, and ungraded papers litter the desk and the floor. The dogs have already settled in their respective spots. Only the station where Will ties his fly fishing bait is in order.

The kitchen is more orderly, but from lack of use instead of care. A very thin layer of dust covers the counters. Everything is undisturbed, besides the coffee maker and the bottle of whiskey, both with their respective mugs and glasses already set out.

"Well," Hannibal remarks, "I can't say I've found anything other than what I expected."

Will glances sheepishly at the whiskey, still holding the basket against his chest. "Do you want a glass?"

"No," he assures him. "Do you?"

Will shrugs and doesn't respond.

"You're not becoming an alcoholic, I hope." The remark is more cordial concern than anything else. Hannibal doesn't smell the stink characteristic of excessive alcohol on Will; he only has once, shortly after the death of Garret Jacob Hobbs.

"There's a difference between drinking your problems away and drinking because you have problems," Will replies, crossing his arms. He leans against the counter, where he sets down the basket.

"Is there?"

Will chews the inside of the cheek, avoiding looking at Hannibal by glancing into the other room. He watches the dogs, all of which are already content to rest.

"As your friend and mock partner, I want to make sure you're taken care of, Will. It's bad for both of us when you go without food and sleep."

Will scoffs. "Look," he grumbles, casting a derogatory look at the basket, "I get that you'll look bad if you take me out and I look like a sleep-deprived zombie. But that doesn't mean you have to pretend to care, okay? You don't have to fool me when no one else is looking."

Hannibal stands still, watching Will closely. The bags under his eyes that seem to come and go with the days only worsen every time he notices them.

"I'm not pretending," he says, keeping his voice low. "Only seeing you well for short bursts troubles me. I truly want to help you, Will."

Biting his lip, Will stares past Hannibal. "And a gift basket is going to help me?"

"Consider it a care package."

Will scoffs.

Hannibal sighs. "You're not questioning my own capacity to care." The statement is dry and feels brittle coming from him. "You're refuting my desire to care for *you*."

"Don't psychoanalyze me," snaps Will. It sounds automatic, like a defense mechanism.

"Will." Hannibal takes a step forward, almost to touch Will, but he holds back.

"Hannibal."

Will looks at him, then, meeting his eyes--challenging, almost. Instead of encouraging him, Hannibal looks at the basket.

"I've brought you some things to help you sleep," he says, ignoring their previous exchange. "Passion flower and chamomile tea to drink before bed; a white noise machine to drown out other sounds; a few of the sedative pills I gave you earlier--for last resort use only, I'm afraid."

Some of Will's tension releases as he looks at the basket, too.

"And what's the other stuff?" he asks, slightly curious.

Hannibal smiles. "Stress relief, mostly. Bath oils and salts to help you unwind. An aftershave to replace whatever putrid substance you're currently using."

One of Will's hands rises defensively to his face. "It's not *that* bad," he mutters, scratching his cheek.

"To you, perhaps," Hannibal replies. The smell is bothersome to his sensitive nose, and would prefer something more pleasant now that he plans to spend more time in his company.

Will looks at the basket for a long moment, deep in thought. The tension doesn't return, but he does begin to glower.

"God," he growls, and rests his elbows on the counter.

"What?" Hannibal asks. "Has no one ever given you a care package?"

Will buries his face in his hands. "No," he retorts, his voice muffled. His hands move to massage his temples. "You knew that though, didn't you?" He lets out a bitter laugh. "It's just... God. When people do this shit, Hannibal, they *want* something from me. People don't do *caring* things for the hell of it."

"Perhaps I'm different," Hannibal offers. He wants Will to believe it.

Will shakes his head, and his hands drop onto the counter, folded. He stares at a spot on the wall.

"You are," he says, almost bitterly, "but not because of this. Just--just tell me what you want. You don't have to keep doing all this."

Hannibal knits his eyebrows, uneasy. "Doing what, Will?"

"*Doing* things for me." Will turns his head to look at him, exhausted. "Making me dinner. Calling me your friend. Buying me suits so you can take me places. Jack isn't paying you extra for all this, Hannibal, so *what do you want from me?*"

A thousand things come to mind, but Hannibal doesn't want to ask them of Will. He wants them to be given because Will wants to give them, not because he feels obliged.

And that, in itself, tells Hannibal how far he's let himself come with all this.

Somehow, he isn't upset by that.

"I want you to tell me how you're feeling," he says, his tone soft. He leans against the counter so he can look closer at Will, bent over it in turmoil.

Will laughs. "Yeah," he sighs. "You and every other psychiatrist out there. Do you want to run tests, Hannibal--or should I say *Doctor Lecter*? Do you want to observe me? To see how I *work*?"

Hannibal's throat clenches, crestfallen.

"No, Will." He shakes his head. "No."

Silent for only a moment, Will slams his fist against the counter, causing the nearby empty mug to rattle. The sound jostles the sleeping dogs in the next room over, but Will remains still, clenched

and angry.

"I want you well, Will. I want you safe within your own mind. I want you to be yourself without fearing it."

Will takes a deep breath, but it's shaky. "Why? Why does it matter?" He begins to wring his hands together. "What does it do for you?"

Hannibal says nothing, finding silence within himself. Will takes another breath.

"Usually, it's people like Jack doing this. They want me functioning so they can use me for something. I'm a tool for their greater good." He closes his eyes, exhaling slowly. "But I don't know what your greater good is, Hannibal. I can't figure it out."

Hannibal purses his lips. "Have you considered the idea that I don't have a greater good?" he questions.

Has he considered that I operate under something else entirely?

"Yes," Will mutters. "But, I just--I can't--"

Hannibal cuts him off by reaching out to touch him. He rests his hand on his arm, just below the shoulder, and he can feel the stiffness there. Will is trembling, slightly.

"We all *want* something, Will. I know that as well as you do. But wants don't have to be entirely selfish. Can't I want you to be happy, to be well? Can't something benefit me simply because it benefits you?"

Will says nothing, but Hannibal can tell that he's close to tears.

It's then that he, slowly, carefully, pulls Will into his arms. He wraps one arm around his shoulders and the other around his waist, bringing him close. He fingers into the cloth of Will's shirt, feeling for the skin beneath, seeking contact and warmth--but not to receive. To give, to offer comfort.

A mutual benefit.

Will simply buries his face in Hannibal's shoulder, breathing heavily. Hot puffs through the fabric of Hannibal's suit, barely enough for him to feel. It's enough, though, to stir something within him.

"Too many people have used you," he sighs, taking in the scent of Will's low-end aftershave, bitter and unpleasant. Underneath that, he can smell *Will*, however, and it's something he can't quite put words to. Something good, though--soothing, warm.

Will stays still against him, breathing, trying to center himself. His hands twitch at his sides, brushing against Hannibal's legs, but they don't move to return the embrace.

Hannibal decides to keep talking, to reassure him, to keep giving.

"I care about you, Will, beyond your potentials. You are not a tool; you are more than just a mind."

He takes a deep breath of his own, and realizes that it's been a long time since he's had someone to care about. Will is the first person he's felt a desire to come closer to.

He moves his hand so that he holds the back of Will's head, and he threads his fingers through the curls there--split at the ends and somewhat oily, but wonderful all the same. Will, slowly, calms down as Hannibal strokes his hair, and his breathing returns to normal. His own hands stay at his side, and Hannibal is fine with that. He doesn't need Will's comfort as much as Will needs his.

But Will pushes away a moment later, his gaze downcast.

"Are you upset?" Hannibal asks him, searching his face for signs of rejection. "Angry?"

Will folds his arms over his chest. "Not anymore," he murmurs. "I--I think I needed a hug." He laughs at that, a quick release.

"Human contact is an essential to human well being," Hannibal reminds him.

"And I know how important well-being is to you."

"To everyone, Will."

Will smiles, perhaps wryly. "I guess I should make some of that tea, then."

"I'll show you how, and then I'll be on my way."

Hannibal feels at peace on the ride back to Baltimore.

It's a calm unique to what he normally feels, overwhelming him without stirring him. For some time now, he's come to believe that peace is only emptiness.

This is better.

Chapter End Notes

That got a lot more emotional than I meant it to be, but it feels like it works so I'm not gonna change it. Let me know what you think!!

Soupçon

Chapter Summary

Will may or may not be catching feelings. Hannibal may or may not be having trouble recognizing that.

Chapter Notes

Look, I know I updated yesterday. I'm just excited to share with you all. Plus, next week I have a busy week and likely won't find time to post, so enjoy the extra content for now!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hannibal is out running errands when his phone starts to vibrate: one short buzz followed by two long ones, and then two long followed by one short. It's morse code for Will's initials, and recognizing it, he picks it up without hesitation.

"Hello?"

"Hey. It's Will."

Hannibal smirks. "I know. I saw the caller ID."

"Right." Will clears his throat.

It's been three days since Hannibal was at Will's house, and they haven't spoken in the meantime. It's pleasant, he thinks, to hear his voice again.

"Is there a particular reason you called?" Hannibal asks. He places a hand on the countertop he's waiting at, forgetting for a moment that he's in public as a smile stretches out on his face.

"Yes, actually," Will answers. He sounds quiet, as if he's trying to be discreet. "I just, ah, wanted to let you know we found another body."

At that, Hannibal quickly remembers where he is and straightens himself out. He glances around the shop, but no other customers are visible, and he can't smell anything besides the sharp redolence of cultured dairy. Muted cello music plays from the back, where Jose is collecting the cheeses that Hannibal requested.

"Oh?" he inquires, trying not to sound *too* interested.

"Yeah," mutters Will, his voice still low. "It's a match to the guy I thought was *your* match."

"Well, that's excellent," Hannibal replies, the image of Johann Nolak's body slumped on his sofa still fresh in his mind. He's yet to serve the tongue to Jack; it's waiting in his freezer for the perfect opportunity. "I'm safe, then?"

"Hopefully," Will says, but he doesn't sound so certain. "It's not the Egalitarian, though. That much is obvious."

"Then he could still be hunting for the other half?" Hannibal muses, busying himself by inspecting the nails of his free hand. Immaculate, as always, but it never hurts to check.

"No. I don't think so." Will cuts off for a moment, and then continues, even more quiet than before. "He doesn't want to offset the balance. He'll move on to another pair."

"Well, that's good news for me."

"Really," agrees Will, and he pauses again. "Can we--can we talk about this later? I'm still at the scene."

Hannibal smiles; it explains Will's hushed tone. Perhaps Jack doesn't want him sharing the details just yet.

"Of course. Shall we meet later today?"

"Ah, sure." Will clears his throat again. "Yeah. I'd like that."

From further away, another voice sounds through Will's phone.

"Will? Are you talking to Hannibal?"

Will sighs. "Yes, Beverly..."

Louder, now, Beverly Katz' voice rings clear. "Hello, Doctor Lecter! Are you two making dinner plans?"

"It would seem so," Hannibal replies. Abashedly, he realizes that his cheeks have begun to ache from the unnatural amount of grinning. "Are you asking to join?"

"What?" Beverly laughs. "Oh, god, no. Not yet, anyway. Jack just told me about you two, and I wanted to congratulate you!"

Will grunts. "Thanks, Beverly. Can you, ah, get back to work now?"

She makes an indignant sound, but leaves. Will sighs, and whispers, "Jack's really pushing it over at Quantico. He wants *everyone* to know."

"I wonder why," Hannibal muses.

"He says it's 'better safe than sorry,'" grouses Will. "He's making it a noisy mess, I think."

"I see." Hannibal glances up as he hears Jose returning. "Well, I have to go in a minute," he says, disregarding his own wistfulness, "but I do want to remind you to pick up your suit today. We have the art show to attend tomorrow."

"I know! I didn't forget."

"I was just making sure." Hannibal falters as he sees the Jose open the back door, feeling as if he should hang up, but he doesn't. "And have you slept better since the other night? Is the tea helping?"

He hears Will groan. "Have you always been so maternal?"

"My apologies," Hannibal amends, but it comes out as a chuckle. Jose is standing across from him now, with a small basketful of cheeses and raised eyebrows. Hannibal glances up at him to silently thank him for his patience.

"But... yes. I slept fine," Will says, hesitant. "The white noise machine is nice." He sounds reluctant to admit it.

"Excellent," Hannibal hums.

Jose taps his fingers against the basket, intrigued.

Hannibal sighs and nods at him. "I'm afraid I have to hang up," he says to Will, "but can I expect you for dinner tonight? We can go over our plans for the art show."

Jose has a horrible smirk on his face, apparently having come to *some* conclusion.

"Sure," Will replies. "I'll be over as soon as I can. I'll, ah, I'll talk to you later."

"Goodbye, Will."

"Yeah. Bye."

Will hangs up quickly, and Hannibal places his phone back in his pocket. Jose has set the cheeses down on the counter and has his hands on his hips, a devilish expression on his face.

"Will?" he repeats, his brows arched further than Hannibal has ever seen them.

"Yes," Hannibal confirms, keeping neutral. "Will."

Jose claps his hands together. "Oh, I had *heard* something about you and another man, but I didn't believe it!" He laughs and throws his head back. "How *wonderful*, Doctor Lecter! I would have never thought."

Hannibal nods. "Neither did I, I'm afraid."

"Even more lovely, then," Jose replies.

Hannibal nods and pulls out his wallet. "Perhaps," he says. "I would appreciate it, Jose, if you didn't tell every open ear about it, however."

"Oh, *of course*," Jose grins wickedly.

Hannibal knows that he won't be able to keep his mouth shut for more than thirty seconds after he's out the door. He supposes it's to his advantage.

"There are still *some* people I want to surprise," he adds, giving him a meaningful look.

Jose's eyes go wide. "Oh, yes." He nods eagerly, and then wavers. "Who, exactly?"

Hannibal hands him his credit card to pay for the cheese. "Old friends."

And what a surprise it will be.

Will arrives at Hannibal's house just past six, his cheeks red from the cold. Hannibal lets him in and leads him into the kitchen; he's already set out a cheese platter from Jose's for them to enjoy as he cooks.

"You'll have to forgive me," he says, rolling up his sleeves. "I only just arrived home, so dinner won't be ready for at least another hour."

Will picks up a water cracker and spreads some brie on it, his expression mildly curious. "I'm fine with just this," he says, lifting the cracker to his mouth.

Hannibal catches his wrist before he bites into it. "Try it with one of the jams," he urges. "And you *will* be eating dinner. I insist; I feel as if I can only guarantee your nourishment when we're together."

Will rolls his eyes and looks at the little jars of jams set on the board next to the cheeses. He uses the spoon provided, very hesitantly, as if he isn't sure he's doing correctly, to dab one of them onto the cracker.

"I ate today," he says, staring down the cracker.

"Well, good," Hannibal replies. "Now eat more."

Will huffs and takes the cracker in one bite, expression turning to confusion as he chews. When he swallows, he points at the jar he took from. "That orange stuff," he says, sounding betrayed, "is *not* marmalade."

"It's cloudberry preserves," Hannibal tells him. "More bitter, certainly, but I find the tang accompanies the cream of the brie quite well."

Will nods hesitantly. "Yeah," he says. "I guess."

Hannibal busies himself with the food's preparation. Dinner, tonight, is baked salmon served over a cauliflower puree alongside a wild rice pilaf. He's once again decided on a single-course meal for Will, who seems more comfortable with less flamboyant ordeals.

Eventually, he thinks, he will be able to work Will up to more extravagant meals. For now, he's content to ease him into the lifestyle. It will be trauma enough for Will to endure the entirety of the next evening's art show.

As Hannibal cooks, Will is content to watch. Occasionally, he tries another cheese and jam combination, but mostly seems content to nibble on the crackers. He is quiet, thoughtful, intent on observing Hannibal.

Hannibal is intent on impressing him.

Their meal is uneventful. Will looks stiff eating with a fork and knife, apparently under a different regime at the dinner table than the other meals he has eaten with Hannibal.

Hannibal tries to help him relax with light conversation and jesting, but Will doesn't seem receptive. He eats quietly, muted and clearly-off put. The mood sours the meal for Hannibal, and he can't help but think that Will has been acting cold the entire day.

Not cold, perhaps. Reserved, uncomfortable, shut-off.

Not unusual descriptors for the infamously antisocial Will Graham, but Hannibal has grown accustomed to a slightly more affable character in the past month or so.

He looks up at Will as he cuts into his salmon and swipes the piece through the puree. "Are you enjoying your meal?"

Will takes a bite of his own salmon and chews it thoroughly before answering, his gaze remaining downcast. "Yes. Impressive as always."

Unswayed by general blandishments, Hannibal presses the conversation forward.

"Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable, then?" he inquires.

Will scrapes up some of the cauliflower puree with his fork and takes it into his mouth, tight-lipped. He sets down the utensil with a *clank* afterwards, his jaw set.

"What makes you think I'm uncomfortable?" he asks, and folds his hands on the table.

Taking one last bite of the pilaf, Hannibal sets down his own utensils. "Your general demeanor, Will. You're off-put."

Will looks away for a moment, smiling wryly. "Well," he laughs. "I wonder why."

"Have I done something, Will?"

Hannibal's thoughts drift back to their last encounter together, with Will close to weeping in his arms. He still can feel Will pressed against him, the warmth he gave, the feeling of his hair against the pads of his fingers.

Will had seemed fine with it at the time.

Biting his lip, Will picks up his nearly-empty wine glass and swirls it. "No," he says, almost grudgingly. "But it's easy to take it out on you. You're the most obvious perpetrator."

The wording is strange, enough to give Hannibal pause. Deciding that it's purely metaphorical, he queries further.

"And what, Will, is the crime?"

"Intimacy," Will replies, almost rueful as he says it. He shakes his head and takes a sip of the wine. "I don't get *close* to people, Hannibal. I get into their heads, but I don't stand beside them."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, noting that they're currently sat across from each other, but again determines that it's purely metaphor.

"Do you consider us intimate?" he questions.

Hope bubbles up inside him--a strange, unexpected creature. Much like affection, or care, it's not native to Hannibal's waters.

Perhaps Will is experiencing similar conflicts.

Will bites his lip, and Hannibal would have considered it coquettish, were it anyone else. However, Will is tense and on edge, and flirtation is something he rarely brings upon himself.

"Comparatively, yes," he replies. "You've taken me out on dates, theatrical as they may be. We've spent time in each other's homes, arguably more than what *I* would normally spend with anyone else." His hands unclasp partially so he can twiddle with his thumbs. "I say things that feel intimate, tell you things that make me feel as if I've stripped myself bare. And yet, you insist I'm not your patient."

Swallowing, Hannibal nods. "Friendship is foreign to you, Will. I remain aware of that."

"No." Will laughs, the same laugh he barks when he's discussing a murder. Brutal, distant in one sense, but devastatingly close in that the thought invoking it has burned itself into his mind. "No, friendship I know, despite what you think about people using me. But this brand of friendship? This is something else altogether."

Hannibal's breath catches in his throat, and he releases it with a casual smile.

"And what is it, Will?"

Will blinks, meeting his eyes for just a second.

"I'm not sure."

Hannibal shrugs. "Then let me know when you find out."

He wonders what Will sees, or what he thinks he sees. Excitement flexes in his chest, a well-constrained muscle.

"That said," Will continues, clearing his throat, "there's something else I'd like to talk about now."

"Do tell." Hannibal leans forward, pushing his plate to the side.

Will does the same. "Today's crime scene," he says. "I mentioned earlier--it's not the same guy."

Hannibal hums. "The Egalitarian has a fan."

"Not a fan." Will raises his eyebrows. "Competition, maybe."

Clever boy, Hannibal thinks. *Competition, indeed.*

"Another killer, then," he says. "Anyone you're familiar with?"

Will smiles. "Funny you should ask, actually."

Hannibal's pace quickens minutely, his anticipation rearing, releasing hormones that make him want to leap. Part of him hopes that Will is implying what he thinks he is, but he thinks he knows that Will isn't fully there yet.

The suspicion is there, he's certain, but not so much that Will is aware of it yet.

"You remember that one scene when we were looking for Hobbes?" he continues, leaning back in his chair slightly.

"A copycat, if I recall correctly," Hannibal confirms.

"*The Copycat*," Will emphasizes. "It's the same killer--even if the motivation is different."

A small warmth, satisfaction, fills Hannibal. "And that motivation is what?"

"He wants me to see," Will replies. His brows quickly furrow. "Or, maybe not me. It could be someone else. But the first time, he wanted me to see Hobbes. Now, he wants me to look away--away from the Egalitarian, I think."

"You think he wants the spotlight all to himself?"

Will nods. "Our Copycat's jealous this time."

A small smile perches on Hannibal's lips. *Clever, clever boy.*

"And how do you think our Egalitarian feel about all this?" he asks.

Thoughtful, Will pauses for just a second. "I think he's curious," he answers. "Or will be, if he hasn't found out yet. I think he'll go looking for his Copycat."

The excitement tries to stretch, tries to run loose, but Hannibal hushes it.

"And how will he find him?"

Will sighs and crosses his arms. "Only he knows that, I think."

Hannibal wonders if Will is so certain. He wonders if Will knows himself.

"I look forward to seeing how that plays out," hums Hannibal. "In the meantime, however, I think I should clear the table. Would you care to help?"

Will stands immediately. "You rarely ask for *my* help, Hannibal." He grins at him.

"There is some give and take between us, I suppose," he says, gathering his plate. "But don't confuse it for payment. You owe me nothing, Will."

"And you don't owe me, either."

"We give freely, then," Hannibal says. "And we take what we are given, without feeling obligated to give in return."

"Those who sow sparingly, reap sparingly," Will suggests, gathering his own dishes.

Not exactly the sentiment Hannibal wants to convey, but perhaps the one closest aligned to every holy scripture.

They leave the placemats and the wine at the table to be gathered at another time, and take the dishes into the kitchen. There isn't much else to be done; Hannibal cleans as he cooks to prevent an overwhelming mess at the end of a dinner. He doesn't want to do all the work *after* he's eaten.

Will's dishwashing method is different from Hannibal's. He fills the sink halfway with the warm, soapy water, and lets the dishes soak there before beginning. Hannibal tries to get in next to him to help, but Will brushes him off.

"You cooked, now I clean," he says, rolling up his sleeves.

Hannibal bites his tongue before he can object; give freely, accept graciously.

Will isn't entirely delicate with the dishes. He lets them jumble together in the water while he busies himself with scrubbing them clean, one by one, and then rinsing them with cool water in the adjacent sink.

Hannibal finds it more sanitary, when doing the dishes, at least, to avoid soaking and simply run the water over them while he scrubs. But he doesn't object to Will's method, as camp-style as it is.

He's not about to argue over something so *domestic*.

They polish off the bottle of wine by the fireplace, with nothing else to do.

Will, sat on the floor, stares into the flames as if he's mulling something over. Hannibal watches him from his spot on the sofa, trying to quell uncalled-for desire that is trying to rupture his demeanor.

It's not enough to make him foolish, or to change his behavior, but it makes his thoughts a little more rowdy.

He wants to be able to tell himself that he is content with this, that this is all he wants, all he needs. He wants to think that he is satisfied to watch Will from a few feet of him, to be able to relish his closeness.

But Hannibal feels distant. He wants Will in his arms again, and he wants to be closer than he was the last time. He wants his mouth at Will's neck and his hands under his shirt and--

He stops himself from carrying his thoughts any further. It's not befitting in the presence of company, after all.

Instead, he tries to initiate conversation. The partnership of a half-bottle of wine and meddlesome emotional turmoil, however, makes him more blunt than he had hoped to be.

"What are you thinking, Will?"

He wants to know what he finds so enrapturing about the fire. He wants to know if he finds Hannibal enrapturing in the same way, if he could look at him the way he looks at the Ripper. To be the focus of those eyes, to be beguiling to what beguiles him...

Will shifts in position to look at him over his shoulder. "A penny for my thoughts?" he asks, and his cheeks are rosily tinted--from the heat, surely, from the alcohol, but not because of Hannibal.

"Your thoughts are worth far more than that," replies Hannibal. He doesn't have the energy to feel affronted by the way it comes out as a sigh, hungry and wanting.

Will laughs and shifts so he's facing Hannibal, leans forward so he can rest his chin in his hands. He looks light, tipsy, and the flames behind him create a hellish halo around him

"Is this all it is, Hannibal?" he drawls, his head tipping to the side. He grins lazily.

Hannibal bites the inside of his cheek and leans forward as well, most of his weight leaning off of the sofa. "You'll have to elaborate," he says, his voice low.

Will turns back around to face the fire. "Sit down here with me," he says, instead of answering the question.

Hannibal doesn't have the resolve to decline, and he finds himself sitting on the hardwood floor once again, rumpling his suit and aggravating his posture. He sits close to Will to make it worthwhile, their sides only an inch or so apart.

Looking at Hannibal and the space between them, Will smiles. "*This*," he says, nodding to himself. "Is this the extent of our intimacy?"

That nonnative creature, hope, tries to swim to the surface, and Hannibal just about lets it. His reservation, however, a well-established predator, quickly swoops in to swallow it whole.

"In private quarters, I suppose," Hannibal replies, noticing the strength to his own accent brought on by the alcohol. To compensate, he keeps himself stiff, not allowing himself to lean closer to Will. "In public, we may need to display affection for each other."

"I don't *do* that," Will sighs. It's in a childish sort of way.

"Nor do I," reminds Hannibal, allowing himself a small smile.

Laughing, perhaps disbelieving, Will turns to look at him. "Then this is uncharted territory." His eyes are lit up by the flames, reminding Hannibal of burning colored paper.

Enchanting but toxic.

"It is," he confirms.

It's suddenly difficult to elaborate, he realizes, because Will has moved closer, removing the gap. His chin brushes Hannibal's shoulder, his chest leans against Hannibal's side. He can feel Will's exhales close to his neck, prickling his skin. He can't say anything; he's too surprised.

Will speaks, instead.

"Then do we... do we need to navigate?"

Hannibal only barely notes the confusion in Will's voice. He is suddenly overwhelmed with heat, and not because of the fireplace. The thought of a symbolic incinerator is a distant thing in the back

of his mind. He turns to look at Will directly, to seek and find desire in his face, to know and delight in the fact that he is not alone in his desire.

But when he sees Will, when he looks into his eyes, he doesn't find what he hoped for.

Will's pupils are dilated, yes. His breathing is shallow, his gaze trains on Hannibal's mouth and jaw, and he's clearly lustful.

But it's lust more than desire, a half-baked thought, likely brought on by the alcohol. This isn't how he wants to have Will, knowing that the other man will likely wake up the next morning without having any real feelings.

He can't take advantage of him, for both of their sakes.

Gently, Hannibal pushes him away, though regret swells within him as he does so. "No," he replies, smiling wryly. "Courses planned with drunken hands always lead to the wrong destination."

Will laughs and returns to a position further from Hannibal, unperturbed. "Even drunk, you sound like a proverb."

"I think you are more intoxicated than I, Will." He feels somewhat plaintive, seeing Will's desire diminish so quickly. There is pain to confirmation, he supposes.

"Probably," Will chuckles. "Wine's not like whiskey, I don't think."

"Likely not."

Will stretches out his legs, seeming slightly more coherent. "Drive home's going to be rough."

"I have a guest room," Hannibal offers, by reflex.

Hesitant, Will frowns. "I have to take care of my dogs."

"A moment ago, you didn't seem so concerned."

The response, admittedly, is bitter. He shouldn't be upset, he knows.

"A moment ago," Will laughs, "I was letting my lizard brain take charge." He shakes his head, as if in wonder at his own actions. "God. It *is* going to be weird, Hannibal. Touching each other in public. I don't--I don't--"

"You don't *do* that," Hannibal says, repeating Will's earlier sentiment. "Need I remind you, however, that you did perfectly well at the opera."

Will purses his lips. "Just more of that?" he asks. "That's all it takes?"

"Not entirely," replies Hannibal. Relaxing some, he, too, stretches out his legs. "You might want to act less dependent. Try and make your touches look as if you *want* to be touching me, not like you have to. Any contact on your part appeared to be out of discomfort, to avoid the others."

A selfish request, partially, but he knows that it will be helpful if Will at least looks *comfortable*. He would certainly like it if Will was comfortable. He thinks of Will leaning

against his side casually, without concern, as they speak to a curious friend; of Will's hand brushing against his as they observe a painting; of Will teasingly placing an arm around his waist.

He would like to not be the only smitten one.

Nodding, Will takes the advice into consideration. "I'll try," he says. "It's just... I'm private, Hannibal. Even if--if I *did* have feelings for you like that, I wouldn't flaunt them. I don't *flaunt* those things." He shakes his head. "I do those things in private. You want the opposite."

Thinking of the way he pushed Will off before, he cringes.

"Hardly," he assures him. "I value privacy in intimacy, when I choose to indulge in it. But this isn't that kind of intimacy, Will." He fights off a sigh, refusing to sound remiss.

"Still," Will murmurs.

It's cheap, Hannibal thinks, to be confined to public displays of affection. The crowd he and Will must present to inevitably fall for false appearances; it's how Hannibal has managed to get this far in life.

He doesn't want that with Will. He doesn't want it to be cheap.

Will doesn't either, he thinks.

But taking him now just to prove it would be equally tawdry, with alcohol pushing them both in directions they wouldn't usually go. If he's to seduce Will, to show him he values him beyond what is necessary to catch the Egalitarian, he has to do it when the time is right. Not when they're both drunk and tired.

Still, it pains him to think that the entirety of what they've had so far is nothing but meretricious display.

A display meant to fulfill the task set by Jack Crawford, no less, the man who's already used Will for far too much.

"We can remain discreet," Hannibal promises him.

"Just enough to sell it," Will replies.

Hannibal clenches his jaw, wondering if he's been unwittingly played by Jack.

He'll have to do something about that.

Will, decidedly not sober enough to drive, agrees to stay in the guest room for the night, though he requests that Hannibal call Alana to see if she can take care of his dogs for the night. While he is upstairs preparing himself for bed, Hannibal reenters the kitchen to look through his collection of business cards, dreaming up recipes for his next dinner party.

Jack thinks he can see through Hannibal enough to capitalize on his feelings, to take advantage of him so that he can further use Will. Hannibal doesn't appreciate that.

In lieu of a thank you, he thinks, he will surprise Jack with another sounder of Ripper victims.

Once he stumbles upon an appropriate combination of meat (a crude young actor named Vince Barcet) and recipe (beef heart marinated and braised in red wine with shallots and wild mushrooms) for the first dish, he decides it's time to call Alana.

Will says that she's usually gracious enough to check on the dogs for him on short notice. Hannibal thinks he'll find some satisfaction in telling her the reason for the short notice, as much of a white lie it is.

The phone rings three times before Alana picks up, sounding vaguely surprised.

"Hannibal," she says. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you on a Friday night. Is this a booty call?"

The tone of her voice sounds joking, but it also makes it sound as though she thinks that he's calling to invite her over for casual sex. The thought of which, he thinks, is absolutely laughable, considering the object of his desire is just upstairs in the shower.

(He supposes that in another world, where Will Graham felt impossibly far away by some horrid stretch of the imagination, it could have been plausible. Alana is, indeed, a very attractive woman.)

"A... 'booty call,' Doctor Bloom?"

Alana pauses on the other line, and he can't tell if she's amused or mortified.

She clears her throat. "It's... It's a bad joke. Forget I said anything. How can I help you?"

Hannibal smiles, already entertained by the idea of her reaction to his next statement.

"Not me, actually," he says, "Will Graham wanted me to ask a favor of you."

"Will?" Alana questions. "Why didn't he call me?"

Hannibal laughs, as if just now questioning this himself. "He's occupied at the moment. I believe he's in the shower."

"Oh." Alana pauses again, longer this time. "He's... in the shower?"

"Yes," Hannibal replies. "He wanted to know if you could check up on his dogs. They need to be fed, I assume."

"He needs me to... He's..." Alana mulls this over, putting the pieces together. "Will's at your house."

"Yes. Will you be able to care for his dogs for the night?"

Hannibal nonchalant tone is, perhaps, what miffs her the most.

"Yes, of course, but--"

"Thank you, Alana," he interrupts, keeping his tone gracious, maybe even relieved. "I apologize for calling so late. We would have asked sooner, but the evening took an unexpected turn."

He lets that idea hang where it is.

"I see." She takes in a breath that sounds sharp over the phone speakers. "Doctor Lecter?" she adds, the shift from 'Hannibal' to his official title glaringly apparent.

Smirking, Hannibal wonders what's on her mind. "Yes?"

"Jack Crawford sent Will to see you for sessions because he thought my relationship with him was too personal." Her voice sounds slightly strained. "Should I be concerned that *your* relationship with Will is too personal?"

A small note of satisfaction rings inside of Hannibal.

"Will isn't my patient, Doctor Bloom."

Alana makes a humming sound, concerned and miffed. "Will needs to be in therapy, especially if he's working with the FBI. I hope he isn't going without necessary psychiatric treatment because *you* had a different idea of what your dynamic should be."

Cold.

Hannibal feels his jaw clench, suddenly realizing that this conversation is not going the way he had hoped it would.

"Your implications make the situation sound quite dark," he replies, slightly wounded.

"Look," she says, curt. "Jack told me about this. I saw Lounds' article, too. I brushed it off as a cover for something. Will isn't into men, after all." She takes another deep breath, clearly agitated. "But he is emotionally distressed. He *is* easily influenced, especially when he's thrown off guard by his empathy."

"Again," Hannibal replies, "your implications--"

She cuts him off quickly. "I'm not saying you're deliberately manipulating him, Hannibal. I know you wouldn't do that. But I can understand that, maybe, your own feelings have gotten in the way, and you're having trouble seeing what's best for Will."

Now, Hannibal is definitely wounded. More than that, he feels defensive. He wants to call on Alana for projecting onto him, for getting upset with him for doing what she clearly wanted for herself...

But he doesn't want her to be upset with him, or Will. He doesn't want her thinking that he would hurt Will. The Hannibal she knows certainly never would, and he believes that the man he hides inside wouldn't either, as long as he had a choice.

He clears his throat. "Alana," he says, deliberating over what to tell her as he speaks, "I believe this conversation has turned sour. I wouldn't want you to believe that I would *ever* do anything besides what is best for Will."

"And you think that it's best that you exploit his vulnerable state to fulfill your own desires?"

Breath hitching, Hannibal shakes his head, even though she can't see it. "There has clearly been a misinterpretation here, and I blame myself for not being more forward."

Alana says nothing, allowing him to continue.

"Your initial suspicions were correct. Jack is asking that I very publicly court Will to provide an excuse for him to operate a search within my social stratum. He would prefer, of course, that we tell no one the truth, but I find shame in leaving you in the dark."

"Huh." She doesn't sound placated. "Then why is Will at your house?"

Hannibal purses his lips. "As I stated, there was an unexpected turn of events."

"Meaning what?"

He sighs, realizing that the real answer might not sound much better. Will is right, he supposes; they are being quite intimate.

He wonders, then, what that means on behalf of Will's feelings.

"We were enjoying dinner together," he offers, somewhat penitent, "and we got carried away with the wine. I didn't think it was safe for him to drive all the way home in the dark."

Laughing shortly, Alana doesn't sound conciliated. "You were having dinner with a patient at your house?"

"Like I said," he sighs, "Will is not my patient."

There is another moment of silence on Alana's end. "Be careful, Hannibal," she urges at last.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I don't find it hard to believe that you've already fallen for Will Graham, and I want you to take to heart what I said earlier. Will might not be able to separate your feelings from his own."

Hannibal closes his eyes, feeling gutted.

"Would you please just check on his dogs?" he asks, wishing desperately for the conversation to be over.

Alana sighs, and he wonders if he's only imagining the pity he hears there.

"Of course."

He hangs up quickly, telling himself with conviction that Alana is wrong.

Will is strong, and despite his empathy, he is able to determine his own desires from those of others that bleed into him.

If Will one day chooses to kill, it will not be because of the killers he pursues. And if Will ends up loving Hannibal, it won't be because he has projected it onto him.

Hannibal knows as well as anyone that there is little say in who one ends up loving.

Yes, I did include the phrase "booty call" in a conversation involving Hannibal Lecter. Yes, I labored for about fifteen minutes over whether or not to include it.

And I really hope you enjoyed this chapter! Things are moving along ;

Espoir

Chapter Summary

Horrible people and Will's horrible attitude make for a wonderful evening of banter and ill humor at the art gallery. Any and all subtlety is out the window.

Chapter Notes

Ten chapters? Whaaat? Thanks for sticking with me so far, pals :0

I really want to thank everyone who's been leaving comments and saying such wonderful things! To those of you that have been reading since I first posted and those of you who have just jumped on the wagon, I'm so amazed at and flattered by your love for this story. It really inspires me to keep writing, and every comment makes me eager to keep on writing the next chapter. I'm so honored to have such wonderful readers! This is a great fandom :')

I think this story will go to 20 chapters, but I'm not setting it in stone because I quite frankly can't predict how these things go. I have a clear idea of where the story is going to end up and what happens along the way, but I have no idea how long it will take to get all of that out. Some scenes might go on longer than I thought, others might go quickly.

But I'm pretty sure it's gonna be a fun ride.

Will is quick to dart out of Hannibal's house the next morning, his cited excuse being that he did indeed forget to pick up his suit from Piero's. Hannibal doesn't find the pluck to join him, and instead sets himself on cleaning the house.

It's rare he has a guest, after all, and another person means *twice* the clean up.

A feeble excuse, certainly, but it's enough to distract him.

The guest bedroom that Will spent the night in is hardly touched. The bed has been remade sloppily, and the curtains have been adjusted, but Will seems to have done his best to leave the room unmarked.

The bathroom attached to it is a slightly different story.

The scent hits him first. Between notes of citrus from borrowed shampoo and hints of rosemary from the soap, there is a distinctive musky smell.

A certain *spunk*, if you will, emanating from the shower.

Hannibal is surprised, but mainly because he hadn't considered in the first place that Will might have--

Well, the thought feels slightly indecorous, so he quickly drops it. It would be disrespectful to infringe on Will's privacy by inspecting further, he knows.

Still, he finds himself lingering. The scent is appealing, a strong and clear indicator of Will's presence in the house. More than that, however, he wonders what Will was thinking of.

Drunk and having come so close to contact, Will might have thought of Hannibal the night before.

Could the thought, a pressing desire, have carried on into the morning? It had to have been recent, he thinks, for him to be smelling it now.

He hurries to clean the bathroom and make Will's bed, not changing the sheets under a bizarre hope that Will might spend another night in them soon.

When that's over with, he busies him self with a less dignified activity, but something that has to be done, given the morning's circumstances.

Glumly, he tries to tell himself to stop acting like a hormonal teenager, but he doesn't listen.

Despite Hannibal's protests, Will does drive back to Wolf Trap to check on his dogs before returning to Baltimore to join Hannibal for the rest of the evening.

Once again, they take Hannibal's Bentley.

The gallery is (as Will puts it) pretentious and (as Hannibal puts it) grandiloquent. Known for only hosting the most coveted pieces, it attracts an exclusive, fat-walleted crowd on opening exhibits.

Hannibal enjoys it, of course. The art is almost always exquisite, and the company is occasionally enough to match. Their champagne selection is never lacking, on top of all that.

He hopes to come home with a new piece of artwork to showcase. He knows that tonight's showing focuses on the works of burgeoning contemporary artists, and he doesn't expect to be disappointed.

Though, he knows whatever he finds at the event will hardly be able to top what he brings with him.

Will's suit for this evening is a discreet gray, though he hardly looks nondescript in it. It speaks well of his figure, which is enough to draw attention. His tie is a subtle powder blue, which is, again, not calling any heed.

It's a testament, he supposes, to their agreement. There won't be any flashy displays of affection so as to not draw *too* much attention to their 'relationship.'

Hannibal wishes he could get lost in the fantasy instead of getting caught in the tangles of credibility, but he knows that such is life.

Will doesn't cling to him this time as they enter the building. The showing hasn't officially opened yet, but the doors are opened early for contributors such as Hannibal. This means for a quieter, but more closely-knit crowd.

Idly, Hannibal wonders if Jeremy Gaul will attend. A craftsman, certainly, but also an American blue blood of sorts.

The lighting inside is low, the foyer being dedicated to abstract sculptures meant to appeal to the sensation of touch. Art exhibits, he thinks, are so rarely hands-on, and he wonders what Will will think of it.

A young staff member in all black greets them, nodding at Hannibal. "Doctor Lecter," she says. "Wonderful to see you again. Let me know if you find any pieces that interest you. The proprietor is eager to sell to you again."

He nods, and glances at Will. "We will keep that in mind," he hums, and then leans closer to him. "Let me know if you find anything you like."

Will smiles toothily. "Fat chance, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal nearly laughs, but remains constrained. The staff member looks at Will with raised eyebrows, but doesn't comment. She doesn't seem impressed.

They walk past, and Hannibal leads Will to the first sculpture, wondering how their evening will turn out.

"Doctor Lecter! How lovely to see you."

Hannibal recoils inwardly and takes one last look at the clay drop he's regarding before turning to regard the source of the voice. He smiles politely as he does so.

"Hello, Doctor Chilton," he says, regarding his colleague. His attempts to look decent are poor; money, Hannibal knows, cannot account for taste.

With a smile practically spackled onto his face, Chilton bows slightly, as if mocking him. Upon rising, he asks, "And what brings you here tonight, Hannibal?"

Hannibal purses his lips. Will is off using the restroom, and is bound to return any minute, but Hannibal isn't sure he wants Chilton to know that. He has a bitter feeling that Chilton will try to use it to his own advantage, and against Hannibal's.

"You know I'm a patron of the arts," he replies. "I'm here to enjoy the new exhibits."

"With company," Chilton adds pointedly, one eyebrow raised. "I suppose you thought I wouldn't notice," he chuckles, despite the fact that Hannibal's expression hasn't changed to show any sort of distaste.

Hannibal tilts his head. "I have no shame in my choice of company."

"No, surely!" Chilton smirks and glances around the room. "If I had the opportunity to observe someone as uniquely twisted as Will Graham, I would feel the same way. Kudos to you for finding a way to keep tabs on him." His tone is far too casual, and he taps a foot absently as he watches Hannibal with a placid expression.

Hannibal, agitated, keeps his composure together, but can't find the strength to reply without saying something he might regret.

Chilton, apparently pleased with this, takes the opportunity to run his repugnant mouth some more.

"Tell me, Hannibal, what's the sex like?" He raises a hand and nods at one of the waiters entering the room with a tray of champagne glasses. "Can someone like Graham even *have* those kinds of feelings, normally? I would be awfully curious to find out."

Hannibal grits his teeth as the waiter approaches. Chilton takes a glass, and so does Hannibal, clutching the stem with white knuckles as he tries not to give Chilton any reaction he might be pleased with.

The worst of it is, he thinks, Chilton isn't even doing it to be an asshole. It's just naturally what he does.

"I mean, really," he continues, taking a swig from the glass with a sordid expression, "I've heard plenty of fantasies from the mentally disturbed. I imagine you have as well. How does it feel to *cater* to them?"

Hannibal, tight-lipped, takes a sip of the champagne. It pops against his tongue, and with it, words spring forth.

"I'm afraid you're spending too much time in that institution of yours, Doctor Chilton. Here in the outside world, we value privacy--especially Will and I, as a perfectly respectable couple."

"Oh, is that what you are?" Chilton hums, the barb glancing off of him. "A couple?"

Nodding, he provides contrived smile (because, by now, Chilton hardly deserves any attempt at sincerity). "Yes," he answers. "Most people do tend to end up in a monogamous relationship, but I suppose you wouldn't understand that."

The jibe is there, though Hannibal wouldn't be so graceless as to say it out loud.

How many of your marriages have you destroyed with your own infidelity, Frederick? Three? Four? It's so hard to keep track.

Chilton glowers while he struggles to find a response, and Hannibal lights up a little. He can see Will reentering the room, warily appraising the layout. He quickly sidles in next to Hannibal, which evokes a fiendish grin from Chilton.

"Speak of the devil--Mister Graham!" he crows. "It is a *pleasure* to see you again."

Will narrows his eyes, noticing the chilled atmosphere straightaway. "The pleasure is all yours, I'm afraid, Doctor Chilton."

"Usually, psychopaths have a little more charm than that, *Will*," he scoffs.

Will casts an agitated sidelong glance at Hannibal, who picks up on it quickly.

"Any respectable psychiatric worker would be able to tell that Will is no psychopath," he returns, taking the opportunity to place his hand on the small of Will's back. "Now, Doctor Chilton, if you'll excuse us--we have more friendly company to visit with."

Chilton harrumphs, but they leave before he can get the last word.

"Well, wasn't that wonderful," Will mutters. They cross into the next room over, which is dedicated to paintings made by marbling silk.

Asymmetrical patterns consisting of eye-catching color palettes fill the silk hangings. Like casual Rorschach tests, the blots of dye that form them create forms that are only half-familiar, but quickly draw associative images to mind.

Hannibal finds himself caught by a red, gray, and black piece that reminds him of an eye crushed underfoot. The crowd in the room seems concentrated everywhere but, focused on more floral-looking pieces.

But he sees Will's eyes drawn to the painting, and watches as his pupils dilate upon seeing it. Hannibal notes that, reminding himself of what a rare thing Will is indeed.

"The evening will consist of more of the same, I'm afraid," he sighs, and quickly downs the rest of his flute of champagne, returning his gaze to Will. "Artists may be a diverse and accepting crowd, but their admirers, typically, are not so amicable."

Will lets out a small groan. "I have to deal with *more* assholes?" he demands. "While you were bantering with Doctor Evil's less enjoyable cousin, I was being harangued by Gloomsgiving McMisogynist by the restrooms. That wasn't fun, either."

Hannibal allows himself a small chuckle. "You met Gary Bessles?"

"I guess." Will grimaces, but his eyes twinkle with wry humor. "He started talking to me at the urinal and within the minute was following me out and telling me how hope for humanity died the day women began wearing pants."

"Did he manage to share his opinions on Marilyn Monroe before you escaped?"

"No...?"

"I envy you, Will. Deeply." Hannibal moves closer to him so he can put his arm around his waist and sighs. "There's more to come, however. I see the Annovers in the corner. We should approach them."

"We're going *towards* more awful people?" carps Will, slowing his pace.

This room, more than the others, is full. At least a dozen pairs have gathered here to regard the ebru art, while servers drift through the room with champagne and appetizers.

"It's best to initiate the conversation on our terms," Hannibal explains, his voice lowering as they merge into the hubbub. "And this would be the ideal time for you to feign affection for me. The Annovers are very orthodox Baptists."

Now, Will stops completely.

"You *want* to piss them off?" he whispers, his tone sharp, glancing around the room.

Hannibal extends his lower lip, pouting in the hopes that someone might catch a glimpse of the uncharacteristic behavior and stare at them. "You usually seem quite fond of agitating people you don't like."

"Don't you have a reputation to protect?"

"My dear Will," he murmurs, leaning in conspiratorially, "I've been looking for an excuse to get under the Annovers skin for over a decade now. That's more than *ten years* of forced polite conversation without respite. You wouldn't rob me of that opportunity to have some fun, would you?"

The Annovers, indeed, have been a thorn in his side for some time. They've been hideously polite to him, however, outside of their homophobic snickering. Flaunting Will in front of them will be a perfect chance to aggravate them while still remaining in the good graces of the rest of his peers.

Suddenly, a grin breaks out on Will's face. "Hannibal," he titters, "why didn't you tell me this was your idea of fun before?"

Hannibal is lost for a moment as Will makes eye contact with him, his smile still wide. The edges of his face crinkle with the expression, mirthful and wicked and *delightfully* antisocial.

"Then you'll help me torment them?" Hannibal whispers, returning the grin.

"Oh, *darling*," Will replies, his voice slipping into the southern drawl of a different character, "I'll do more than just *help*."

Will leans into Hannibal and pulls him towards the Annovers, placing a hand precariously low on his back. Hannibal's skin prickles at the touch, wondering what exactly he has in mind.

"Mister and Missus Annover!" Will cries as they approach, the accent slightly slurred. "Hannibal has told me *all* about you!"

His loud call is jarring in the quiet atmosphere, and the couple, as well as a few other heads, turn in unison to regard them. Chester Annover has his arms crossed over his chest, and Bethany Annover's eyebrows are raised, eyeing Will in contempt and curiosity.

Hannibal smiles apologetically at them, but they don't seem to notice, too busy taking in the sight of Will draped over him. He leans fully into Hannibal now that they're stood still, keeping his hand planted *just* above his buttocks.

"Doctor Lecter," Bethany chokes, her eyes darting to the low place where Will's arm disappears behind Hannibal's back, and then taking in the way that Will seems to dissolve into the whole of him. "Who is this?"

"Yes," Chester agrees, a frown materializing on his face. "A friend of yours?"

Hannibal smiles, not moving to further their touch. Will's initiative contact, contrived as it may be, is enough. "Oh, this is Will. He's--"

"I'm Hannibal's lover," Will supplies, smiling blissfully. His gaze shifts to a waiter to their right, and his eyes widen as his grip on Hannibal tightens. "And that man has more champagne! Hannibal, sweet, can you get me some?"

Hannibal almost laughs, realizing that Will is pretending to be drunk. He knows very well that Will, in his paranoia, has not had a single alcoholic drink so far.

He doubts anyone else has noticed, though.

"Of course," he replies, and moves to step away, but Will doesn't let go. He smiles at that, seeing the intention. "As much as I would hate to pry free from your grip, *sweet*, you'll have to let me go a moment."

"Oh." Will sighs and releases him, winking over his shoulder as he lets him wander away.

Hannibal can feel the discomfort rolling off of the Annovers as Will initiates further conversation, more social than Hannibal has ever seen him. He approaches the waiter.

"Could you take my glass?" he inquires. "I've had enough for the night, but my date would like some more."

The waiter looks at him curiously, and Hannibal is stricken by a familiar scent. The cologne he wears, perhaps, or somewhere he's just come from. He's much too distracted with thoughts of Will to consider it further.

Handing over his glass, Hannibal notes the watch on his wrist. Delicate, silver, and certainly familiar.

"Is that one of Jeremy Gaul's creations?"

The waiter blinks, but smiles. "It is," he answers. "It was a gift."

"It's lovely," Hannibal tells him, taking a full glass from the tray. "I haven't seen Jeremy in years. Is he still in town?"

"He never left," the waiter replies, smiling at him. It looks contrived; the man is likely exhausted, given the evening's company.

Having known that already, Hannibal returns the smile. "I should see him again, I think."

The waiter gives him a one-shouldered shrug, and Hannibal thanks him before returning to Will. The Annovers have already retreated, to his partial dismay.

"You scared them off," he comments.

"I did," Will answers with a smirk, taking the champagne flute from him. "Once I started driving on about how I hadn't had the chance to kiss you this evening, they found a reason to excuse themselves. They're very squeamish about that sort of thing, I think."

Hannibal involuntarily raises his eyebrows. "Well, it wasn't entirely false," he says. "You *haven't* had the chance to kiss me yet."

Will swallows a large mouthful of champagne. "Well, if you can find any more homophobic friends of yours, I just might."

Hope once again tries to establish a position within Hannibal. It wrestles, it snarls, and it prevails. In being a terribly snarky companion, Will has found himself a place where he feels comfortable at Hannibal's side.

"Do you intend to act drunk for the rest of the evening?" he asks, stepping in next to him.

Will returns his hand to the low spot on Hannibal's back. "It's too late to back out now."

Chuckling, Hannibal glances at him. "Were you an actor in your youth, Will?"

"Of sorts," he replies, rather evasively. "Being the weird kid at parties sometimes called for alternate personas to survive the night."

He wants to know the story behind that, but doesn't feel the time is appropriate. "And the accent?"

Will shrugs. "I grew up in Louisiana," he provides. "Sometimes I get drunk enough to bring out the old drawl."

"I didn't notice it last night," remarks Hannibal, curiosity stirring in him.

Will glances at him, his cheeks flushing pink. "Maybe I wasn't *that* drunk," he mumbles.

That rowdy thing, hope, gives way to his brother desire, which blooms like cherry blossoms in spring. Hannibal wonders, he *hopes* Will means something by that.

He wonders if they might have a chance to *navigate*.

Will continues to tease and chatter with the other attendees at the gallery, though he lets Hannibal do most of the talking. They spend less time looking at the art, preferring to rile up Hannibal's acquaintances instead.

As they do so, Hannibal sees in Will what he always knew was there. A cunning, manipulative man, capable turning himself into something of a chimera to distract unwitting prey.

There's a possibility, he thinks, that Will might one day use that ability to trap prey for something more than just a sharp jest. He imagines Will using his skills to lure in a dinner for them some night.

Lost in the blithe attitude of the evening, it doesn't feel alien for Hannibal to picture them going that far together. In a hopeful promise of that event, he sneaks off to ask one of the staff members to ask the proprietor if he can deliver the red and black ebru piece to his house. He doesn't bother to ask the price, and she doesn't bother to tell him.

Hannibal returns to Will with the image brought on by the painting bright in his mind--blood fresh and black and slick leaking from the skull of an enemy, their eye ruptured and cast away on the floor.

A prickle of hope is there, wondering if Will can blossom into his full potential without having to fall apart.

They don't get a chance to kiss, though with Will's drunken act, their promise of subtlety falls through quickly. Hannibal finds himself subject to playful groping and incessant touching throughout the rest of the night, but he somehow finds himself reluctant to reciprocate with more than a gently placed hand or a doe-eyed glance.

There's a bursting want expanding within him, bolstered by the physical contact and Will's alarmingly charming southern accent, but he keeps it in check.

They drive back to Hannibal's house in an entertained bliss, buzzed from a good time more than any champagne they drank. Despite the poor company, they found camaraderie with each other, and

it clings to them even after they leave.

Everyone else was entirely inconsequential; Will had been the focal point of his night.

He doesn't think it's a far stretch to assume that the contrariwise is true, too.

Once they've returned to Hannibal's house and get out of the Bentley, they somehow fall back into physical contact, despite no one being around to watch. They lean on the hood of Will's car, pressed against each other, side-to-side, laughing about something Hannibal's already forgotten about.

He doesn't want the night to end, if he's being entirely honest with himself. He can hardly comprehend how *that* happened. It had started off so roughly.

Will sighs, interrupting his thoughts, and nudges him gently with his elbow. "I should head home," he confesses, his voice heavy. "The dogs won't be too happy if I stay here another night."

Hannibal swallows, touched by the idea that Will considers that an option--though, to what capacity, he isn't sure.

"I suppose," he replies, letting out his own wistful exhale.

Will steps forward, clearing his throat. "I, ah..."

Hannibal speaks before Will can fumble with his words any further.

"Thank you, Will," he says. "I enjoyed tonight."

Will just smiles. "I wish I had known you were secretly as roguish as me in a crowd full of uppish bastards. We might have started having fun together sooner."

Hannibal cocks his head, allowing himself a satisfied hum. "Does this mean you no longer consider me an uppish bastard?"

"Maybe," Will scoffs, his smile still friendly. "You're probably the poshest man in Baltimore, but at least you aren't a *total* ass about it."

"I'm glad to hear it." Hannibal pushes himself off of Will's car, brushing off the seat of his pants. "But we needn't dwell on nights lost. I sense there are plenty more ahead of us."

Will nods, but his face quickly falls.

"Until we catch the Egalitarian, at least."

Hannibal clenches a fist involuntarily, wanting to say that it really doesn't have to end there.

Will hisses something under his breath and turns his head, now lost to the thought. "I didn't even *think* about looking for him there. *Dammit.*"

There's another silent curse beneath that, a bitterness towards another shortfalling, and Hannibal wonders what it is.

"We still have time yet," Hannibal reminds him. "Three more weeks. At least three more events to attend before the ballet. You'll find him."

Especially with some of Hannibal's direction. He knows who the Egalitarian is, after all.

"Yeah." Will, quickly, has moved to a distant place. He's no longer with Hannibal in the moment.

"Sleep well tonight, Will," he urges. "There's work to be done, but you mustn't forget yourself."

Nodding absently, Will shuffles to his car door, no longer the bright and playful man he was just minutes before. The weight of the world has settled back on his shoulders.

Hannibal grasps his arm before Will can retreat into the vehicle, and locks eyes with him.

"I'll see you again soon, Will."

"Yeah." Will shrugs him off and sinks into the driver's seat of his car. "I'll... I'll call you."

"Please do."

Will closes the door and starts the engine, disappearing onto the road in less than a minute.

Hannibal lingers in the driveway, filled with a vague sense of dissatisfaction and a peculiar cloud of optimism.

He can't help but think that he's very close.

Close to what, or how close exactly, are details he will suss out at a later time.

Amour

Chapter Summary

The Ripper strikes; Hannibal has some company and realizes something important. (Nothing y'all hadn't already figured out, though.)

Chapter Notes

This chapter includes animal abuse and some canon-typical violence.

It's also very long and my favorite one of all that I've written. I've written up to chapter 13 as of this note, so I have some work to do if I want to keep ahead!

Jack Crawford calls Monday evening, while Hannibal is swimming laps at the pool.

He sees the notification on his phone as he dries himself off in one of the private stalls. Before answering, he dresses himself. Hair still wet and tousled from the towel, he dials Jack's number and exits the building.

As he approaches his Bentley, Jack picks up.

"Good evening, Doctor Lecter."

"Jack," he returns. "I'm sorry I didn't answer your call sooner; I was swimming."

Crawford laughs. "Ah! The secret to your perfect shape is revealed."

"There's more to it than that, I assure you." Hannibal opens the door to his car and gets in, but leaves the engine off.

"I'm sure," replies Jack. "But I didn't call to ask about your fitness routine. How are things with Will?"

"Hasn't he told you?" Hannibal queries, setting his bag on the floor in front of the passenger seat. "He should be reporting to you about the case."

"We're all busy, Doctor." Jack clears his throat and the line crackles with it. "But, no, just a few words here and there. Do you feel things are going smoothly? No one will be too surprised to have him show up for the opening night?"

"All will be well, Jack," he promises, a grimace beginning to fall on his face. "He's quite well-liked, despite his prickly exterior. I think it pleases people to see I've befallen a similar fate to the rest of them."

"And that is?"

Hannibal huffs. "In their eyes, I've fallen victim to love's cruel leash, and Will is the one who holds it."

"A previously unfathomable notion," quips Jack.

"For them or for you, Agent Crawford?"

"Both," he chortles, seeming quite satisfied about something.

Hannibal embraces the grimace fully and leans back in his seat. "You mean to say you've fallen for a charade of your own invention?"

"Have you?" Jack returns. "This was as much your idea as it was mine, Hannibal. And from what I've heard, you've been carrying it further than what would generally be considered necessary."

Hannibal wishes he could see the look on Jack's face right now, almost entirely because it would be so much easier to envision strangling him for it.

"I'm dedicated to my work."

"And Will," Jack points out. "You don't need to hide it, Hannibal. I wouldn't have asked this of you if I hadn't thought you would be perfectly willing to comply."

Hannibal stills, unsure to be irate or delighted that his suspicions have been confirmed. Jack, indeed, thinks he can exploit Hannibal's feelings for Will without consequence, just as he thinks he can freely capitalize on Will's extraordinary gift.

Forcing a brittle laugh, he says, "You don't strike me as a workplace match-maker, Jack."

"And I'm not. I just know an open door when I see one."

Hannibal sighs, not wanting to seem contemptuous. "And what tipped you off?"

"You're not the only one who can read people, Doctor. I work in behavioral sciences, after all."

"So you do," he concedes. He places one hand on the steering wheel, gripping it until his knuckles turn white. He feels more than slightly agitated.

Jack chuckles. "Just don't get too carried away, okay, Hannibal? I need Will to stay focused, and he won't be of much use to the FBI if he's caught up in an affair."

Hannibal tightens his lips, bothered by both the implication a relationship with Will would be a mere *affair*; and by Jack's blatant indifference to Will's personal well-being.

"I trust you want me to find him another psychiatrist," he says, steering the conversation elsewhere.

"That would be a good idea." Jack takes a breath. "I'll leave that to you, Doctor Lecter. Right now, I have to return to my wife. Enjoy your evening."

"Oh, I will."

Hannibal hangs up, and wonders whether or not Bella has told her husband about the cancer yet. He'll have to ask her in their next session.

For now, he doesn't worry. With the endorphins still running through him from his swim, he has to continue with the rest of the evening's tasks.

He's planned to throw a dinner party the night of the opening ceremony of the Baltimore Ballet Theatre. He hopes that Will can help him host, or at the very least attend.

At present, he has just about everything ready. The recipes have been selected, the necessary staff have been hired, and the invitations have been written and should be in the mail by morning.

All that's really left to do is the preparation of the food, and first and foremost, he needs to secure the meat.

Luckily, he's already determined his first kill for this party's sounder. The pig is Vince Barcet, a young man still suckling off of his trust fund with no motivation to do any real work. He's deemed himself an actor, though he's only ever been in commercials and one 'off-broadway production.'

Hannibal met him through a mutual friend of the boy's father, who grudgingly confessed she was being blackmailed into convincing people to attend his show. It was a one-act musical written purely out of spite after a local playhouse hadn't cast him in any of their roles. Hannibal didn't have to attend to find out that it had been pitiful; the people he had 'hired' to help him put it on were enraged because he never paid them back.

All around, Hannibal has no taste for a living Vince Barcet, and he looks forward to sinking his teeth into him.

After stalking his social media accounts and doing a considerable amount of research, Hannibal has ascertained exactly where he will be for the night, and it's nowhere safe in the first place. No one should be surprised when the hideous young creature goes missing.

Deep inside of one of Washington D.C.'s abandoned subway tunnels, a handful of nothings and no-goods gather to bet on and watch their favorite detestable sport.

Hannibal, costumed in a dark overcoat and a knit cap to make him harder to recognize, joins them, watching from the edge of the crowd. He carries a large briefcase with him, filled with the necessary tools, but no one pays it any note. No one pays *him* any note.

There's perhaps two dozen men there, circled around two grungy, malnourished dogs. They form a ring around them, holding electric prods to keep them from escaping through the gaps and forcing them to stay focused on the task at hand.

The dogs are both young males, their fur patchy and their skin covered in scars. The larger one, a Rottweiler mix, has fresh wounds along his spine. The smaller, clearly a pitbull, has one partially-healed torn ear.

They snarl at each other when they stand still, and growl and snap when the other gets near. Whenever one barks or makes too much noise, it gets jabbed with the electric prod.

Some of the men grow restless, jeering.

Hannibal glances around the crowd. Barcet is there, towards the front, looking nervous but excited. His hands are stuffed in his pockets, likely holding whatever money he's hasn't bet yet. He bounces in anticipation while the dogs continue to snarl and circle each other.

"Come on!" Barcet cries. "Make 'em fight!"

Some of the other men cheer in agreement, and one of the men with the prods quickly jabs one of the dogs, pushing it towards the other. The two beasts quickly begin to touse, biting into each other and wrestling, clearly fighting for their lives.

Hannibal's stomach turns with distaste. He has no respect for the cowards here who must get their fix of violence by harassing weaker creatures. He sees more nobility in the dogs they enslave, and wishes that the men didn't have their prods.

He has a feeling those mutts would tear the men's throats out, given the chance.

Hannibal has arrived late into the fray of the evening, and there are only a handful of other dogs left to be fought until the night is over. The owners stand further back in the dark tunnel, some keeping their dogs in chains and others in cages. Outside of the ring, the dogs are meek and frightened, ducking their heads and whistling moans, only to be kicked or otherwise attacked by their posessors.

Will would have destroyed these men, no doubt. He detests murderers, but he *loathes* abusers.

Hannibal amuses himself with the thought of a rage-sickened Will. He imagines what the man would do when left alone with one of these swine and the right tools, what art he would be driven to create. Would it be thoughtless or calculated? Would he enjoy it?

He thinks he knows the answers, and smiles at the idea. He fits in with the rest of the crowd for that, his morbid curiosities satisfied--just not from the dogs themselves.

As the event comes to an end, Hannibal keeps an eye on Barcet, who's been watching one of the owners in the back in curiosity. That man has several dogs with him, all in cages, and none of them look as if they've seen the ring yet. Some of them are terribly small, and noting their ages, Hannibal realizes that this man is a breeder.

Barcet approaches him, and Hannibal follows, staying behind as if waiting for a turn to speak to the breeder. He's close enough to hear the hushed conversation.

"You're new to the ring," the breeder comments, giving Barcet a quick once-over. "Want to get yourself a dog? You can make big money off him."

Nodding eagerly, Barcet looks at the dogs. "They're all fresh?"

"Fresh?" the breeder laughs and kicks at the cage of one of the larger dogs, causing it to cower silently. "Oh, sure. Haven't fought before, if that's what you mean."

A sick grin twists on Barcet's face. "But they've been exposed, haven't they?"

"They're right here, pal. Of course they have. I don't coddle the fuckers."

"Of course, of course."

"You want one?" the breeder demands. "It's two hundred for a fully grown, seventy five for a little one. Depends on how fast you want to get it in the ring."

"I think I'll want to train mine," confesses Barcet, a thoughtful expression clouding his eyes. "I think I could win a lot of matches that way. My father taught me how to train dogs as a boy." He crouches down to look at one of the cages, where a blue-gray pitbull puppy cowers. It can't be more than two months old.

"Hello, fugly," Barcet coos, his expression wicked. The dog, not knowing any better, wags its tail slightly.

"Fifty for that runt," spits the breeder. "It'll need a lot of feed to get to a decent size."

Barcet tilts his head, strategizing. "Responsive, though," he mutters. "I'll take it. Fifty, you said?"

Hannibal watches as the money trades hands, and then Barcet takes the cage. With a notable amount of strained effort, he carries it with him down one of the main tunnels.

Hannibal follows in the shadows, silent as they move further away from the ring.

No one notices him; not even Barcet.

The pup, however, seems to sense him. It keeps trying to look at him, making yelping sounds. Each time it does so, Barcet rattles the cage and spits at it.

A despicable human, Hannibal thinks. Hurting a dog is no more decent than attacking a child--and Hannibal, however immoral, would never hurt a child.

Barcet, however, the fiendish little man, is another story.

Once they've move far enough away from the rest of the ring, and into a side tunnel, Hannibal feels ready to strike. To his benefit, Barcet sets down the dog cage to rest a moment, and that's when Hannibal attacks.

He comes up from behind, the dog yipping excitedly as he does so. As Barcet turns to kick its cage, Hannibal strikes his temple with as much force as he can, which quickly knocks the man unconscious.

Hannibal moves quickly to carry his body as planned into another tunnel, but finds himself faced with a dilemma as the little dog stares up at him from its cage.

He can't just leave it here to die, and he can't just set it free to be recaptured by the dog fighters.

But he can't take it with him, either. It would be terribly risky.

The dog lets out a loud bark, perhaps pleading, and Hannibal thinks of Will, making a hasty decision.

He carries both the cage and Barcet's limp body to one of the abandoned underground platforms. It will be empty for the night, but a tourist will stumble upon what Hannibal leaves at a later date.

There, he dons his killing suit and ties Barcet's hands and feet so he can't escape. This is just for ergonomic purposes; once he's done with his work, he'll hoist Barcet from the pipes on the ceiling like a marionette.

Before he wakes, Hannibal decides to sew his mouth shut, for both artistic effect and practical purposes. He doesn't want the screams ringing out through the tunnels, after all.

He clearly did a good job knocking Barcet unconscious, because he barely stirs when his face is bleeding and his lips are sewn tightly together.

He does wake, however, when Hannibal takes his scalpel and begins cutting into his chest. Barcet's eyes snap open, and he tries to struggle, but the ropes and Hannibal pinning him down makes it difficult to do so.

He wails, the sound muffled by his closed lips. His expression is beyond pleading, already filled with terror.

A rush fills Hannibal; it's always good when his prey struggles. It gets his blood flowing.

He cuts deeper, through the muscles of Barcet's chest. He uses his hands to pry open his rib cage, the bones cracking in protest, blood spurting onto Hannibal's vinyl cover. Barcet weeps, screaming to no avail. The sound, while loud, doesn't have much chance to reverberate through closed lips.

Once the most gruesome part of the job has been done, Hannibal reaches into the man's chest with his gloved hand. He feels it pound against his palm, and Barcet can barely lift his head to watch in horror before he passes out from the pain and the blood loss.

Without much more to do, Hannibal takes his scalpel and cuts out the man's heart, killing him at last.

Hannibal stows the bleeding heart in a miniature cooler that fits into the case.

The dog watches curiously as he does so, standing close to him in its cage.

"I'm almost sorry you had to see all that," Hannibal murmurs.

He quickly gets to stripping and stringing up Barcet's corpse, bare and vulnerable and heartless and without a word to say otherwise, his mouth sewn shut. When found, Barcet will finally be a performer that people will remember.

Hannibal has brought worth to him while disgracing him, and as he packs everything that's been contaminated into a plastic bag to be hidden within the briefcase, he feels quite proud of himself.

When everything is properly washed and stowed back in his safe location, Hannibal returns home with the dog.

He left the cage out on the street to be found by someone else, but carrying the dog without it had been a piece of work. It wasn't used to being held, and it nipped at him and struggled while he worked to subdue it. Once or twice, it managed to escape, but the poor thing was hardly strong enough to run away.

It's funny, he thinks. He can pin down and restrain a man a hundred pounds heavier than him, but a ten pound sack of skin and bones somehow manages to wriggle free from grasp. He ended up having to swaddle it with his coat as if it were an infant, and even then, it didn't stop struggling.

Now, the little beast sleeps, wrapped up in the overcoat and placed on the front seat.

The coat is part of a costume; he doesn't mind getting fur on it. The seat of his Bentley, however, is a different story.

Occasionally, he glances at it during the drive. Despite everything it saw that evening, and despite the life it has lived so far, the dog seems very content. At peace, even. It rests with its little head on paws too big for the rest of its body, occasionally making small sounds.

Hannibal is reminded of the mutt he found for Mischa when they were still very young. It was a shaggy thing, built and colored very differently than this little gray pitbull, but it slept the same way.

He tries not to let sentimentality rot away at him like a cavity, and he carries the dog inside as soon as he gets back to his house. He deposits it in the guest bathroom on the ground floor, still sleeping on the coat, and rushes out to retrieve the cooler with the heart. He leaves that where it belongs in the basement, and then hurries back upstairs.

It's approaching two, far too late to still be up, but Hannibal suddenly finds himself quite frantic.

There is a *dog* in his house, and he doesn't know what to do about it.

Well, he knows he could certainly sort it out for himself if he needed to. He could leave it in the bathroom and arrange to take it to the animal shelter in the morning, and everything would be quickly forgotten.

But, then again, this provides him with a perfect opportunity.

He decides to sort out an acceptable story and call Will.

"Hannibal?"

Will doesn't sound as groggy as he rightly should, being called so early in the morning. Hannibal, however, while dismayed, isn't at all surprised.

"Yes, Will," he says. "Hello."

Will makes a grunting sound, and Hannibal can hear the groaning of the bed beneath him through the phone's speakers as he rises. "Hannibal, it's two in the morning. Is everything okay?"

He takes a moment to appreciate the husky quality to Will's voice before responding. "Okay is a relative term," he says. He is stood outside of the bathroom door, behind which the dog is now awake. He can hear its claws clacking against the stone floor and scratching everywhere.

Hannibal can't bring himself to open the door and check for damages.

"Okay," Will answers. "What's going on?" He sounds perplexed and a touch suspicious.

Hannibal sighs. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to ask for your help," he lies, "but it's been a number of hours and I haven't yet determined what I'm going to do."

"Do about what, Hannibal?"

Pausing for effect, Hannibal exhales. "I found a dog," he tells him, and the distress in his voice isn't at all feigned. The story that follows, however, is. Leaning against the door, he continues. "I was preparing for bed when I saw something in the yard. I thought it was a skunk, but when I turned the light on to investigate, there it was." He closes his eyes, mustering a dramatic tone. "A *dog*. In my yard, Will."

Will is silent for a moment on the other end, thoughtful. "What did you do about it? Is the dog alright?"

"It's fine," Hannibal assures him. "I led it into the house, and now it's asleep in one of the bathrooms."

"Okay." Will takes a deep breath. "And this couldn't wait until the morning?"

"No, Will, it couldn't," Hannibal snaps, knowing very well that it could have but he is refusing to back down. "I'm panicking, and I don't know what to do, because there is a very young dog that could very well start teething on the base of my bathroom counter!"

He is, actually, becoming quite frantic, now that he's allowed himself to. It feels almost cathartic, if he's being entirely honest.

"Alright, okay," Will says, still sounding perfectly calm. "How young is it?"

"One or two months, perhaps," Hannibal answers, lowering his own voice. "It's very small."

"Okay, so the bathroom is a good place for it. Do you have a space heater you can put there?"

"My entire house is heated, Will. I'm not a barbarian."

"Right, sorry," grumbles Will. "Have you checked for any wounds?"

Hannibal falters. It very well could be wounded, he supposes, given the actual circumstances under which he found it. He doesn't know for sure.

"I don't know how to check," he says. "But it could be injured. It seems quite skittish, when it isn't sleeping."

"Okay, got it."

Hannibal hears the sound of Will rising from his bed, and the dogs waking around him.

"I'll get dressed and be over there as soon as I can, okay, Hannibal?"

"Thank you, Will."

"Stay calm, okay? It's not going to ruin any of your furniture, I promise."

Hannibal finds that, left alone with the dog and the adrenaline left over from the night's activities, he's having trouble calming down, let alone *staying* calm.

Typically so reserved, so controlled after a night like this, he's further alarmed by his own distraught attitude. He's filled with anticipation and more pesky desire.

Will is coming to his house in the middle of the night, right after he has murdered and put a man on display, and there's a *dog* in his house.

He decides to take a shower to clean himself thoroughly, and to settle his thoughts.

They don't stay very settled, however.

Will arrives just past three, which is record timing, considering the length of the drive. Because of the early arrival, Hannibal is still upstairs, and has to rush down when he hears the doorbell.

He's changed into his pajamas and has remained barefoot, partially because it's more a more believable state to be found in at such an early hour, and partially because he knows Will enjoyed seeing him like that the last time.

When he's answered the door, he's so distracted by Will's exhausted (but beautifully lit) face that he hardly notices the dog at his side.

When he does, he just about jumps back in surprise, already being so on-edge.

"Will!" he cries, half accusatory and half delighted.

Will blinks. "Hey." His voice sounds scratchy from exhaustion, and his face remains neutral.

Hannibal can't spare a moment to regard him further. "You brought a dog," he states, staring down at it. He recognizes it, of course, though he can't remember its name. It's the large black and tawny one that leaves more fur on Will than the rest.

Smiling hesitantly, Will nods. "Yeah, this is Winston. I brought him just in case the little guy wants some company. Sometimes it helps calm them down."

"Oh. Excellent." Hannibal continues to stare at it, frozen in the doorway.

"Can we come in?" asks Will, picking up on his hesitation. "Winston doesn't have to come in if you're not comfortable."

Pursing his lips, knowing that he's brought this upon himself, that it was bound to happen sooner or later, he nods. "No--yes, it's fine, just come in." He shakes his head at the stammering and the audible reluctance. "You, *and* your enormous shedding machine, are welcome in my home."

He sighs as he says it, closing his eyes and stepping out of the doorway to let them enter. "Don't let it on any of the furniture," he adds, partially under his breath.

Will places a hand on his shoulder. "Winston's well trained," he assures him. "Can you take me to the dog?"

"Yes, yes."

Will's hand slides down Hannibal's arm, resting for a moment on his elbow. Hannibal takes a deep breath and leads Will to the guest bathroom, where he can hear the dog scratching and stumbling around.

Winston pads carefully behind them, and his ears perk up as he approaches the door. He sniffs at the bottom of it, and when the pup notices his presence, it starts barking.

"Stay out here with Winston for a few minutes," Will orders. "I'll check on it, and then you can both come in."

He sounds perfectly calm, perfectly in control. This, Hannibal realizes, is Will's element. Though he finds it perturbing that their roles have suddenly been switched, he finds joy in Will's quiet confidence.

He opens the door by just a crack and slips into the bathroom, and Hannibal waits outside, listening to him murmur to the creature quietly. Winston wags his tail and watches the door, patient.

Hannibal can't make out all of Will's words, but his tone is kind and paternal, something the dog certainly isn't used to. He finds himself smiling, comforted by the comparison to the rough language of the cruel men at the dog fighting ring.

The door cracks open again, and Will's face presses through. Whistling softly, he calls Winston. "Come on, Winston. Someone wants to meet you."

Hannibal follows the dog to the door, but stops when Will doesn't open it further.

"Do you have antiseptics? And gauze? She's got some cuts on her paws."

"There should be some underneath the sink," he replies. "May I come in?"

Will gapes slightly, but nods quickly and scoots away from the door so that Hannibal can enter. He closes it quickly behind him, and Will settles against the wall, holding the little dog in his lap. Winston hovers next to him, sniffing at the trembling beastie.

"You've calmed it down," he comments, joining them on the ground.

"Her," Will corrects. "She's a girl."

"Oh." Hannibal nods. "Of course."

"Get the antiseptics?"

It's a question, not a command, and Will's voice is very soft. He cradles the dog against him, and Hannibal is quickly compelled to do as asked. He pulls out the first aid kit in the bottom drawer; he has one in every bathroom in the house, and for more than one reason.

"I'll hold her," Will whispers. "You know what you're doing."

Hannibal smiles wryly and moves closer to Will. "I'm not exactly familiar with canine anatomy, Will."

"They're just scratches."

Will is gazing down at the dog like a mother would a newborn child, and Hannibal remains quiet, not wanting to spoil anything. As he applies a disinfectant to the pads of her feet, the pup flinches away, and Will is quick to hush her, murmuring to soothe her fears.

Winston sits and watches, occasionally sniffing at Hannibal's hands.

He wraps gauze around miniature paws, adhering it carefully with medical tape. He has to lean in very close to be able to do it well, and he doesn't realize until he's done that his face has been inches from Will's the entire time.

He takes a breath and meets Will's eyes before quickly moving away, his heart suddenly hammering in his chest.

He's exhausted, and more emotional than he has been in decades. It's been building up slowly, he thinks, these feelings. While they're usually individual bursts he can compare to an emerging lone organism, he's now overwhelmed with them.

They've integrated into him, becoming a forest instead of a few scattered trees. Hope, longing, anxiety, want, fear, joy, excitement... there are too many to count.

He wonders if this is the peak of it, if it will go away.

Despite the years he's spent suppressing them, he finds he doesn't want to.

Doctor Du Maurier would be utterly thrilled.

Will breaks him from his thoughts with a smile. "See?" he mumbles. "That wasn't so bad."

"Are you talking to me or the dog?"

With a huff of laughter, Will looks up at him. "Both."

"Normally," Hannibal sighs, "I would be offended. However, seeing what high regard you hold these animals in, I'm flattered that you would speak to them and I in the same breath."

Will is silent. He rubs his thumb over the dog's head. She's closed her eyes, and appears to be drifting off to sleep in his lap.

"Thank you for calling me," he says, quiet but not distant.

"Thank you for coming."

Will nods and meets his eyes. "She's lucky you found her, poor little thing."

"You mean she's lucky I called you."

"Yeah, I guess." Will smiles again, his face incredibly sweet. "She'll need something to eat when she wakes up, I think. She's extremely underweight; probably starving."

The memory of the creature struggling in his arms returns to him. There had been no strength in her movements; he severely doubts that she has had much opportunity to use and develop muscles in her short life so far.

"I can't imagine who would do this to something so sweet," Will sighs. He scratches behind the dog's ears, and her tail twitches some. "Do you think she's from somewhere around here?"

"God, no," Hannibal responds, almost too quickly. "I only know of two households in the neighborhood with dogs, and they are terribly pampered."

"I thought as much." Will straightens his back and looks at Winston, who's laid down next to him, resting his head on his lap by the puppy. Absently, Will uses his free hand to stroke the larger dog, continuing to massage the little one's love-starved head. "Would you be like that, Hannibal?"

Hannibal frowns. "Like what?"

"Would you pamper your dogs?" A grin is on Will's face as he says it, and he's clearly lost to his imagination. "I bet you would. You'd take them to the groomer and exclusive dog parks, devote an entire wing of the house to them, cook them fancy meals. They would love it."

"That's assuming I would ever have dogs, Will."

More to himself, Will chuckles, "You would."

Hannibal can't help but agree, but only if they were Will's dogs, too.

He tilts his head back against the counter, filled with a strange pleasure knowing that Will should be sticking around the house for a while longer. He'll have company for the morning, at least.

"Perhaps," he agrees. "When the time comes."

"So, you won't be keeping this one?" Will asks, raising his eyebrows.

"You're joking, I hope," Hannibal returns. "Puppies are filthy, wild creatures."

"Oh, sure," mutters Will, rolling his eyes. "Look at what a monster she is."

Hannibal laughs then, knowing fully well that the only monsters were the men that planned to make her life a living hell. Knowing that he saved the dog, he feels that there's more justice behind this last kill than on average.

He wonders if Will would approve.

"Will you take her, then?" Hannibal asks. He honestly can't imagine a better home for any dog. Will's love and care could surely wash away whatever abuses she suffered before.

"I can't *not*," Will sighs. "You know how I am about strays."

Picturing the seven dogs permeating Will's life, Hannibal nods. "I think I do."

Will smirks and runs his finger down the dog's spine. "You can come visit her," he adds, winking at Hannibal. "We can share custody. I know you want to."

"Hardly," Hannibal scoffs, but there's an edge lacking in his tone. "You can keep her."

"Yeah, right," Will says. "You love her already. You wouldn't have taken her in if you didn't."

Hannibal considers the risk he took in taking the dog with him. She poses a number of problems that could complicate the situation for him, and yet he doesn't care.

Love, indeed. But not for the dog.

He loses his breath as he realizes that he loves Will Graham.

He doesn't just desire him, he doesn't just care for him.

He's in love with Will Graham.

He laughs, then, louder than he should. It wakes the puppy and startles Winston, but Will just laughs in return.

"Let's see if we can get her to eat, okay?"

They enter the kitchen (*with* the dogs, to Hannibal's veiled horror), and Will begins searching for something to feed the pup.

Said animal stumbles around a small mixing bowl of water that Hannibal set out for her. She crashes into the bowl like a drunkard several times before finally submerging half of her face in the water, attempting to drink.

Will focuses on his search. "Just... something lower-end, I guess," he mutters, opening the vegetable crisper, of all things. "I wouldn't want to feed her anything too fancy."

Hannibal sighs and joins him at the refrigerator, closing the crisper. "You won't find anything here *low-end*, Will. I don't keep dog food in my house." He opens the bottom compartment, where he keeps his poultry, and removes a raw chicken breast. "This should suffice, however."

"I should have brought something..."

"It's fine, Will. I'm sure the starving animal will appreciate the quality."

Will pulls a confused face. "I can't tell if you're being sarcastic or not."

Hannibal grins and takes the chicken to the counter, where he pulls out a knife and cutting board. "I'm nothing but sincere at all times, *William*," he teases, and begins to cut the meat into little cubes.

"Oh, sure," says Will, clearly not convinced. He stands next to Hannibal and touches his wrist. "I'll deal with that. You can heat up a pan or something. I don't know where anything is."

Glancing at the point of contact, and then back up at Will, he simpers, pleased. "The meat won't be raw?"

Will takes the knife from him. "I give my dogs pre-cooked meat," he replies. "It's usually safer that way."

"Then I can cook it," he says, striding over to the stovetop. "What do you normally feed your dogs, Will?"

"Not that commercial shit," Will answers, slicing into the poultry carefully. "The canned stuff is way too high in sodium, not to mention BPAs, and dry feed is terrible for their digestion."

Hannibal listens intently as he takes down a frying pan and lightly greases it with olive oil.

"I make them a mixture," continues Will. "I keep a freezer stocked with basic ingredients. Cooked grains, meats, vegetables... That sort of thing. It's easy just to mix it all up, heat it up, and give it to them."

He continues on, content to explain to Hannibal his procedures and routines for caring for his canine companions. While Hannibal shreds a sweet potato to add to the feed, Will happily recounts where and how often he walks the dogs, how it makes him feel. He explains that he does his best to cater to them even when he's having a horrible day himself.

Smiling, a bittersweet sensation in his chest, Hannibal takes the cutting board from Will, the chicken diced into miniature pieces ideal for the pup's mouth. He places the contents into the frying pan, allowing them to sizzle and brown slightly before he adds the sweet potato.

"You take much better care of them than you do yourself," he comments. "Your health might be a lot better if you ate their diet."

Will laughs. "I do, actually, when I'm home--when I'm eating. It's easier to cook for all of us. Is that weird?"

"Perhaps." Hannibal stirs the mixture, which cooks quickly thanks to the tiny pieces it's cut into. He glances over his shoulder to see Will not far behind him, now holding the dog, who is dripping from her failed attempt at the water bowl.

"I'm weird, anyway," mutters Will. "So are you, though. So I feel fine."

Happiness, certainly an unfamiliar sensation, prickles at Hannibal's skin. "We're alike, then."

"I think so," Will agrees. "Maybe more than you think."

Hannibal, smiling, moves to the sink, where he partially fills a cup to slowly add to the pan. When that's done, he places a lid on top for it to steam, less concerned about flavor and texture than he is about timing. It's for a dog, after all.

He faces Will with a hand on his hip, watching him curiously. He imagines the same--however, it's more possible that they are more alike than *Will* thinks.

"What makes you say that?" he asks.

"A lot of things," Will replies. He adjusts the dog in his arms, letting her paws rest on his shoulder. She seems much more docile than she was when Hannibal was trying to get her to his vehicle.

"I can agree with that vague statement," says Hannibal, allowing himself an amused smirk. "I find you incredibly rare, Will. I see more of a companion in you than I have in anyone else."

Will nods in return, readily meeting Hannibal's eyes. "I feel the same way. You're... you're easy to be around. More than anyone else."

A relief he hadn't expected pools in his chest, and a tension he hadn't realized releases from his shoulders. Feeling slightly dizzy, he turns around and lifts the lid on the pan. It's hardly cooked since he put the lid on, but it gives him something to do instead of moon at Will.

There's the sound of Will placing the floppy little dog back on the ground, and he glances behind him to see her slip and slide across the tile until she runs into Winston.

He can't help but smile again, and it only spreads when he feels Will brushing shoulders with him on the opposite side.

"It should be ready in a few minutes," Hannibal says. "I'll see if there are any other dishes I'm willing to sacrifice. Clearly, the mixing bowl apparatus isn't working for her."

As he moves to survey his cabinets' inventory, Will grabs his wrist.

"Hannibal," he says.

He stills, frozen against Will's touch. His heartbeat accelerates slightly, his stomach turns in excitement. He's stalled temporarily, internally gawking at his pathetic, textbook reaction.

This is what his patients have always described to him, but it's something he hardly ever believed was legitimate.

Will tugs on his arm, and Hannibal turns to face him, trying to focus on his eyes, but they are steadily trained on where Will's hand meets his wrist.

"Is something wrong, Will?"

Will shakes his head, touched with something akin to regret, and he drops Hannibal's wrist. "No," he says. "I'm--I'm just exhausted. I'm not thinking straight."

"That's not entirely new," remarks Hannibal, and he takes Will's hand in his own, to reassure him. "But you seem quite coherent tonight, despite the late hour."

Staring at their hands like the contact is something altogether alien, Will blinks.

"I feel kind of disoriented, actually."

"I'm lightheaded, myself," Hannibal confesses. He takes Will's shoulder with his free hand. "Perhaps we ought to steady each other."

At that, Will laughs. A gentle thing, but happy nonetheless. "That's a good way of summing us up, don't you think?" he asks. "Two boats with broken rudders, tied onto each other to stay steady..."

"Getting lost together?" muses Hannibal.

"Yeah." Will smiles and runs his thumb over Hannibal's knuckles. "No navigation. Just...us."

Hannibal wants to do something brash, something appropriate, but he doesn't. The lid on the pan rattles from the steam, and he breaks free to attend to it.

"That should mean it's ready," he sighs. "Take one of the shallow bowls from the cupboard. It should be cold, but I think an ice cube would help to cool it down before we give this to her."

"You're fine with using one of *your* bowls for the dog?" Will questions, standing on his toes to reach up into the cabinet. He pulls out one of the rarely-used clay bowls, eying it curiously.

"It hardly matters."

Will shrugs. "Ice is in the freezer?"

"And water is wet, Will."

The pup eats a large portion of the food, considering her size, and leaves some to share with Winston. Despite not having any positive social contact with other dogs (or humans, for that matter), she seems to be doing fairly well, as far as etiquette goes.

They move to the living room and sit near the fireplace together, which Hannibal never even bothered to light. They're there out of habit more than anything, in a space that they've learned to find comfortable with each other in.

Winston settles himself next to the sofa, and the puppy nestles against him, finally receiving the warmth and contact she has been deprived of for so long.

Hannibal wants to give that to Will, and something tells him that it might be welcome.

Instead, however, they sit next to each other against the wall, shoulders brushing, watching the dogs sleep.

It could have been ten minutes or an hour when Hannibal feels his eyes grow heavy, and Will leans against him.

Yawning, he asks, "What should we name her?"

Hannibal hardly needs to think of an answer. It feels natural.

"Calypso."

Will hums in agreement, moving closer to lean against Hannibal. He's so exhausted that he doesn't even question it, contentment spilling into him like cool water over a burn.

"I like it," Will whispers. He rests his head on Hannibal's shoulders. "I like this."

"Yes," Hannibal agrees, closing his eyes.

Softly, Will whispers something else.

"I don't care how you really found the dog, Hannibal. You did the right thing. You always do the right thing."

Hannibal can't be sure that it's real, that Will is real. He plays the sentences over in his head, wondering what their meaning extends to.

He drifts off to sleep shortly after, dreaming of lost ships and soft curls.

He hasn't dreamed so vividly in a long time.

Confiance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hannibal wakes slowly.

The first thing he notices is the stiffness in his back and neck, the hard support of the wall behind him. It baffles him; he shouldn't have fallen asleep against the wall. Why would he do that?

The second thing he notices answers the question, and completely cancels out any and all discomfort. Will's forehead rests against crook of Hannibal's neck, his nose pressed to his chest. He breathes softly, the rest of his body close to Hannibal's, leaning and touching and so very *near*.

Hannibal is frozen, unwilling to move. He tries to capture every sensation, every quality of this moment, so he can preserve it forever in his memory. A warm pleasure is flooding his veins, filling him from head to toe with a warm joy.

Will's breathing is deep, relaxed. Hannibal doubts his rest is always this serene.

He notices the light that's filled the room since they fell asleep, and he assumes that, by now, it's past midmorning. A slight chill has filled the air, which makes Hannibal only want to nestle closer to Will.

He has no desire to wake him or to move, though he knows he's likely already missed at least one of his appointments. He wants to revel in the moment for a little while longer--Will pressed against him, breathing softly.

Then, however, he remembers the dogs, and sees that they've since vacated their position by the sofa.

That can't be good.

He groans, protesting his own decision, and gently prods Will.

"Will," he whispers. "Wake up."

Will stirs, only to dig himself further into Hannibal. Barely conscious, he places a hand on Hannibal's thigh, gripping it as if it will keep him in whatever peaceful dream that currently holds him.

Hannibal takes a hand to hold the back of Will's head. He eases his fingers through the curls there, gently massaging the scalp. He does it without thinking, without regret. Will makes a small sound and somehow sinks further into Hannibal, locked onto him.

"Will," he repeats, still disinclined to force him to wake. "Come on."

His grip tightens as his eyes flutter open, and his breathing shallows but remains steady. He stiffens momentarily and pushes himself off of Hannibal.

"I fell asleep," he says, incredulous.

"We both did," Hannibal answers, feeling the cold seep in where Will was previously nestled. He wants to pull him back in, but knows that it's too late for that.

Or, too early, he supposes. The situation is still entirely up in the air.

Will slumps against the wall, closing his eyes again. "I had very strange dreams," he mutters. "I'm not entirely sure that they're over." He opens one eye to glance suspiciously at Hannibal, as if trying to ascertain his reality.

Hannibal smiles, and ruefully pushes himself to his feet. "I feel rather real at the moment," he replies, "and I'm loathe to think any of this has been a dream. Though, admittedly, the reality of the morning is quite stinging." He cringes as he stands, feeling a tweak in the lower part of his back. "It's quite late. I think I'm missing work, and your dogs are still loose in my house."

That seems to jolt Will. He clambers to his feet, looking around anxiously.

"Oh my god," he says. "Winston and--and the puppy--"

"Calypso," Hannibal reminds him, wondering himself if those last few moments of consciousness were entirely real.

Will's breath catches, and he glances at Hannibal. "Yeah," he says. "Calypso. I--I don't think she's house trained."

He nods, remembering once again why he decided to wake Will in the first place. "Neither do I. Shall we look for her?"

"She shouldn't be too hard to find," Will tells him, already moving towards the kitchen. "She's not familiar with your house, and there's only one place she's learned to associate with food. I bet she's in the kitchen."

Hannibal follows, and they indeed find Calypso there. She's knocked over the water bowl from last night, and it spills into another puddle of her own creation on the tile floor. Another foul smell permeates the room.

Winston is there, too, lying down in front of the refrigerator. He looks mildly exasperated, like a middle schooler left to deal with a toddler.

Hannibal doesn't know when he started to personify dogs, but he supposes it has something to do with Will.

"Oh, *shit*," Will sighs, regarding the mess. "I'll clean it up. Do you have paper towels?"

Hannibal blinks at him.

"Of course you don't." Will rolls his eyes, and stares down at Calypso.

"I'll get a mop," Hannibal offers, and quickly hurries off to the cleaning closet. He has supplies there meant to clean up much worse messes than just dog waste, and he isn't too worried.

At least the dog had the decency to spill on the tile floor, which could easily be cleaned. Hannibal had dealt with humans with less consideration than that.

He returns with the necessary cleaning supplies. Will has already procured a ziplock bag to deal with Calypso's solid mess, and together, they work quickly, the spell of the morning broken.

Wordlessly, Will takes the dogs out to the back yard, and Hannibal begins preparing breakfast for both them and the dogs.

He takes out his phone to check the time, dismayed to realize that it's already past eleven. He calls the two patients whose appointments he missed, apologizing profusely and offering to reimburse them and for their next appointment to be free of charge. He texts the remaining three, apologizing for the short notice and informing them that the day's appointments have been canceled.

He doesn't feel willing or capable to work today, for a plethora of reasons.

Will comes back inside, both of the animals in tow, his hair still wild from sleep and slightly tousled from the wind outside. Hannibal has already portioned out the remainder of last night's dog food, and is halfway through the process of making a protein scramble.

He makes a pot of green tea, thinking that neither of them *really* need coffee. The excess caffeine will alter the well-rested sensation that Hannibal knows they share.

They don't talk for several minutes, but they both jump when Will's phone rings out of the blue. It's still in his pocket, it seems, and Will fumbles in his ordinary fashion to answer it.

Hannibal turns to continue preparing their breakfast while he listens to Will's conversation.

"Hello? Jack? Yeah, I'm fine. No, I didn't see your texts. Is something wrong?"

There's a poignant pause, and Hannibal senses a shift in the air.

"I see. I'll be over as soon as I can."

Will hangs up quickly, and when Hannibal glances over his shoulder at him, he notes that his expression has remained neutral.

"It's the Ripper," he says, with a nonchalance similar to that which one might use when referring to the chance of rain in the afternoon. "And the Egalitarian on a separate scene, apparently, but Jack's prioritizing. It's going to be a busy day.

Hannibal doesn't react to that beyond a sigh as he stirs at the scramble. His mind is quickly filling with unwanted thoughts, the main recurrent one revolving around the fact that he hadn't expected his kill to be found so soon.

Will stands behind him, expectant.

Hannibal, silent, places the bowls of dog food on the ground, feeling strange as he realizes he hadn't done it yet. He suddenly feels as if he's stepped into a dream, and Will's gaze is piercing into him.

"I can keep the dogs here for the time being, if need be," he says, returning to the scramble. "You'll want to rush over to the crime scene, I presume."

"Yeah." Will moves to stand next to Hannibal, watching him cook. "Maybe. Jack probably thinks I'm in Wolf Trap. I might have time to have breakfast with you."

Surprised, Hannibal looks at him with a cocked eyebrow. "This is the Ripper, Will. You're content to sit and eat breakfast with me?"

"I'm not too concerned." Will shrugs and uses a hand to waft the scent of the food towards him. "Besides," he adds, "you're always telling me how important it is to be fed."

Hannibal nods, suddenly feeling strange.

Wary.

"Would you mind setting the table?" he asks.

They don't eat at the table.

They eat the scramble at the kitchen counter, half-bent over their bowls like a pair of savages. The dogs have been left to wander outside, and Will takes his time eating, quiet but quite amiable. His mood doesn't seem affected by Jack's news.

"You really aren't concerned?" Hannibal inquires, bringing a forkful of sausage to his lips. He feels slightly brash, serving Will long pig just before he leaves to investigate the Ripper.

It's not enthralling like it normally would be.

Will also takes a forkful of sausage, slowly bringing it to his mouth. He makes eye contact with Hannibal as he takes it between his teeth. He chews, returning his gaze to the bowl, and swallows.

Casually, Will shrugs again.

"I won't be stopping him," he replies. Clearing his throat, he adds, "Not today, at least."

Hannibal feels his heart skip a beat, but conceals any sort of anticipation or surprise or longing or fear by taking another bite. He barely notices what it consists of; he could have somehow swallowed gravel just then without realizing, seeing as he's too busy trying to read his situation while simultaneously trying to determine how and why he's feeling a dozen different emotions at once.

"Whatever do you mean?" Hannibal asks, setting down his fork. He only notices then that they haven't even set down *placemats* on the counter. They're just eating with their bowls on his marble counter like plebeians, and he doesn't have enough emotional capacity to add disgust to his cocktail of feelings.

Will grins, then. A bright one at that, unusually jovial, but not at all contrived.

"No one's caught him yet," he says with a shrug. "Why would today be any different?"

His mouth suddenly gone dry, Hannibal nods.

"I think I'll press us some orange juice, then. You don't seem to be in a hurry."

"By all means, Hannibal," Will replies, and he takes another bite of the scramble. "Though I didn't know you pressed your own juice."

"Are you surprised?" Hannibal asks, going for the fruit bowl, which does have an abundance of Valencia oranges. They're in season this time of year, after all.

Will laughs, his usual huff. "You stopped surprising me a little while ago," he confesses.

Hannibal wonders if he'll manage to surprise Will again.

Quite suddenly, however, it doesn't seem that likely.

A half hour passes, and Will still hasn't made any moves to leave. They've finished breakfast, polished off the orange juice, and have cleaned up completely. Will remains in the house.

He leans over the back of one of the sofas in the living room, perching like a watching cat as Hannibal lights the fire.

"While I certainly enjoy your company," Hannibal remarks, lighting the tinder, "I can't help but think that Jack won't be pleased if you're late to the crime scene." The hairs on the back of his neck prickle, but he isn't full-blown suspicious yet.

Will yawns, evidently indifferent. "I can tell him I had trouble getting out of Wolf Trap. If I left now, I would still be a little early, so I don't see the rush."

Hannibal is almost foolish enough to ask if Will has really calculated how long it takes to drive to Washington when he realizes that Will hasn't told him where the crime scene is.

A slip up, especially at this point, could be detrimental.

Or, it might not matter at all.

Instead of speaking immediately, he watches as the tinder suddenly ignites as a whole, bursting into flames that will taper out soon if he doesn't add a log. One waits just to his right, and he carefully sets it where it will light before reaching for another.

"How long is the drive?" Hannibal asks.

"To the Ripper scene? Less than an hour from here. It's in D.C.."

Hannibal sets the other log into place. "Then I suppose your timing should be fine. But why lie to Jack?"

"Do *you* think I should tell him I ended up spending the night here?"

"Technically, you were only here for the morning," Hannibal reminds him. "It would be perfectly plausible to assume that you stopped by for a late breakfast."

"Now *you're* suggesting I lie." Will removes himself from his position on the back of the sofa and sits down next to Hannibal, watching the fire quickly catch.

"Jack already assumes we've taken the cover too far," Hannibal says, somewhat evasively. "I see no point in giving him any reason to think that is true."

Will's gaze is fixed on him, now, no longer watching the fire.

"Have we?"

Hannibal switches from his crouch so that he's fully seated on the ground, by now a position he's become familiar with in Will's presence. He crosses his legs and places his hands on his knees, as if in a meditative pose, and takes a deep breath.

Unable to muster anything beyond his catchphrase vague response, he says, "We are what you deem us to be."

Laughing, Will nods. There is nothing malicious or devious in the way that he looks at Hannibal; nor has there been the entire morning. Still, Hannibal can't shake the feeling that something is *off*.

A voice in the back of his mind whispers incessantly.

Will knows.

"I figured you'd say that," Will says. He draws his knees to his chest, and still smiling, he looks into Hannibal's eyes, all-seeing. "We're companions," he decides, blinking but not breaking eye contact. "We settled on that last night, didn't we?"

The way he says it, Hannibal feels as though it's a pact.

That soothes him, some, but he worries that it's exactly what Will intends.

Worried that Will has been manipulating him, that he *is* manipulating him, Hannibal scours his memory for any evidence. There is nothing in their interactions that would imply such a thing, besides a few possible double entendres here and there.

At least, nothing he can determine in the brief seconds he has before he is forced to formulate a response.

"We did," he says, at last.

Despite the delay, there's no doubt in his words. Will sees it, and Hannibal wonders if he's just played himself into Will's hand.

"Companions are generally equal, Hannibal," Will says, and his voice has softened. His hand moves so that his little finger is brushing Hannibal's. "Are we equals?"

Hannibal, despite himself, places his hand over Will's. "We are what you deem us to be," he repeats, feeling weak.

When Will laughs this time, it's breathy. Like he's in disbelief.

"Equals, then," he says, staring now at their hands. "Can you trust that?"

Not moving, barely breathing, Hannibal whispers, "Should I?"

Will pulls his hand free and gets to his feet. "I think trust is an independent thing. It's up to you to determine whether or not you can."

Still seated, Hannibal looks up at him. "And you trust me in that?"

They're dancing around the idea that Will can expose Hannibal, that Hannibal can hurt Will before he does so. Or, at least, he thinks they are. He isn't entirely sure anymore. His head feels foggy and light, his tongue heavy in his dry mouth.

"I do."

Will places his hands in his pockets and looks towards the staircase, furrowing his brow.

"You'll stay with the dogs until Jack's done with me?" he asks, turning to look at the front door. "I probably should be going, now."

Hannibal stays seated. He doesn't really know why.

"You should."

Will nods, digs around in his pocket for his keys and his phone, and heads towards the door. As he opens it, he looks over his shoulder. "I'll see you here this evening, okay?"

There's a silent order there, or perhaps a request, and Hannibal has to agree to it.

Trust me.

Hannibal is antsy for the rest of the day.

Whether it's anxiety or anticipation or anything else he really can't pinpoint. There are so many different feelings swirling inside of him all at once, so any dominating factor is impossible to pick out.

Maybe he's just emotional altogether, and that's why he's so stir-crazy.

He considers calling Bedelia, but brushes it off. What would he say to her, anyway? That he thinks Will might have uncovered his true nature?

He supposes he could say exactly that, but it would do little to relieve his... whatever they are. Fears?

He feels as if he would be remiss to leave the house, thinking that in that time, Jack could send in a team of FBI agents to wait to arrest him. Thinking further, however, he realizes that if Jack was planning to arrest him, it didn't really matter whether or not he went out for a stroll.

If he had to run, he would run, and he frankly doesn't feel like he needs do.

As Will asked of him, he's trusting him.

He's still not entirely sure what he's entrusting Will with, however.

He decides to take Winston and Calypso to a nearby dog park. It can't hurt him more than anything else at this point, and it might even feel good to get out of the house and away from his thoughts.

Reluctantly, he loads them into the Bentley, knowing fully well that he has no leashes and Calypso probably can't walk more than a few meters without collapsing. Instead of worrying about getting

dog hair on his seats (because it really might not matter anymore), he finds himself wondering the entire drive if Will is capable of putting him behind bars.

Would Will want to?

This entire time, he's been meaning to slowly groom Will. He has wanted him to see him from the beginning, and to hopefully join him, but he feels as if he hasn't been doing a very good (or at least deliberate) job getting him there.

And regardless, Will might know. Will might already be there with him, or he could be in the process of apprehending him at this very moment.

He doesn't know why he hasn't done something, why he hasn't already begun to flee for safe measure.

Well, he does know.

He doesn't want to leave Will.

He's played himself into Will's palm, just as he'd feared from the beginning, and now he only has to determine what Will plans to do about it.

At the park, Hannibal finds that his thoughts have become more scattered. He is surrounded by familiar faces and is filled with doubt, but the concern apparently doesn't etch onto his features.

Neighbors and acquaintances greet him as normal, and ask him when he'd gotten dogs.

Weakly, he answers that it's a fairly new development. Most of them are already aware of Will's presence in his life, and chalk it up to that.

Gracefully, they don't pry too hard.

Winston runs around the park like he's searching for something, but does play well with the other dogs in the vicinity. Calypso stays close to Hannibal, stumbling around and sniffing things, but more than to content to fall asleep in the dry grass.

Hannibal breathes deeply and watches the clouds overhead in the pale winter sky. Wrapped in a heavy overcoat, he's not at all cold, but he still feels chilled.

Change is in the air, and it's coming for him.

Then again, it has already, hasn't it?

He's sitting on the grass instead of a bench, after all. Evidently, he's lost all respect for his clothes.

Hannibal returns back to the house in the late afternoon, the day having completely slipped away from him. He has no appetite, for once, and instead opens the bottle of whiskey that he and Will had shared not even a week before.

It feels much longer than that, now, and he isn't sure if that's good or bad.

He sits by the fireplace, on the floor, waiting for either Will or a SWAT team.

A quiet calm seeps over him, and he knows what it is, despite every conflicting thing within him.

It's trust.

Chapter End Notes

Bit short, sorry about that. Next chapter will totally make up for it, I promise!! I said I wouldn't update until I've finished writing a new chapter, and I technically have, so here you go!!

Let me know what you're thinking so far!

Faim

Chapter Summary

Mutual decisions are made.

Winston is restless by the time evening approaches. He waits by the door, occasionally whining, likely wondering where Will could be.

Hannibal's thoughts are in a similar place, as it turns out.

By seven o'clock, no one has showed up at his home, and nothing has really happened at all. Hannibal has managed to consume a single, meager glass of whiskey, but it's no large feat considering the hours he's spent waiting.

He doesn't feel the need to drink. Not because he wants to remain alert, but more because he doesn't feel the need to. There's no fear or concern he needs to drown out, because whatever anxieties he has are equally matched by hope and wanting.

It's as if he's feeling every emotion there is to feel.

Quite opposite of what he's accustomed to, to say the least.

So, he waits by the fire, which he's kept burning steadily. His shoes have long since been kicked off, his coat draped over the sofa. Calypso is asleep in his lap, and he absently massages her tiny body, the wrinkles of her baby fat scrunching between his fingers as she rests.

When the hour hand on his watch has passed eight, Hannibal considered moving upstairs to play his harpsichord. It might distract him, might settle the thousand things he feels churning inside of him.

Before he can make up his mind, however, he hears the rumbling of an engine outside, and headlights pierce through his window. They both cut off abruptly, and Hannibal hears the slamming of a car door. A long moment passes, and then there's another slam.

He straightens his posture, watching Winston, who's begun to wag his tail as he remains a sentry at the door.

Hannibal expects the doorbell to ring, but instead, Will just knocks. It feels more personal, and perhaps more considerate.

"It's open," Hannibal calls, feeling no need to get up and wake the blissful Calypso.

A moment later, he hears the latch turn and the door open. He watches the flames as he hears Will enter his home, the sound of an army of paws following after him.

Hannibal doesn't greet him, but turns his head to see Will hang up his coat like the house is his own, and then leads all seven of his dogs out towards the back door.

He waits while Will lets the dogs outside, continuing to stroke the sleeping beauty in his lap.

Will joins him by the fire moments later, silent as he sits next to him. They're close, with no space between their sides. Through the fabric of his shirt, Hannibal can feel Will's cool body temperature brought in from the outside. Will's scent is overwhelming, chemical and unfamiliar. He's spent time in the forensic lab, clearly.

Idly, Hannibal toys with Calypso's ears. "You've made yourself at home," he remarks.

"You let me in," Will reminds him.

"True."

A silence gathers between them, like dew on grass. It collects and then rests, ready to abruptly fall or slowly evaporate.

Will shifts next to Hannibal, moving closer instead of further away. He brings his hand to join Hannibal's in petting Calypso, but the beastie is so small that their hands just end up overlapping.

Hannibal can't help but think Will was intentional in that, and notes how cold Will's hand is on his own. He wants to share his warmth.

"I brought my dogs because I didn't want to leave them alone again tonight," says Will, gently tracing over both Hannibal's fingers and Calypso's back. "We have a lot to talk about, I think."

"We do," he agrees. He flips his hand, palm up, and catches Will's, lacing their fingers together.

It feels right.

It's terrifying.

Will stares at their hands in curiosity. He uses his thumb to stroke the back of Hannibal's, as if he's calming an animal.

Hannibal supposes that it's a safe thing to do, despite the fact that he feels perfectly calm. If there was meant to be betrayal, it would have happened already.

"Tell me what you know," he says, and it comes out as a whisper. "Tell me why you're here. Tell me what you *want*."

At that, Will laughs softly, his body moving with it, the motion reverberating into Hannibal.

"Come on, Hannibal," he sighs. "We already went over our give-take status. I don't want anything from this--just like you don't want anything when you do things for me."

"Are you returning a favor, Will?"

Shaking his head, Will smiles wryly. "I don't owe you anything--you said so yourself. And you don't owe me anything, either. Not for this, not for anything."

Hannibal looks at Will, taking in his profile so softly illuminated by the firelight. His burning desires and fantasies regarding the incinerator and Will joining him at it are muted, silenced behind his desire to make sense of their current situation.

"And what is *this*, Will?" he whispers. "What exactly have you done for me?"

He wants him to say it, to have it confirmed before he stumbles and confesses to what he is.

Will smiles and sways slightly, leaning away from Hannibal and back into him.

"I've seen you," he answers, glancing at him from the corner of his eye as if he's trying to be surreptitious. "I've seen you for what you are, and I've decided to trust you. I've been quiet."

The warmth that fills Hannibal is more subtle than what he would have expected, especially after the constant onslaught of intense feelings from the past few days.

But Will is subtle, too. Hannibal expected a struggle when this moment came, for Will to be resistant to admit to Hannibal's nature. He thought there would be a fight.

Will is calm, placid, and doesn't seem at all upset.

Hannibal squeezes Will's hand, and brings his lips close to his ear, feeling his own heart racing. Beneath the chemical odor that clings to Will, Hannibal can smell an excitement on him.

"Tell me what I am, Will."

Goosebumps form on Will's skin, and the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He holds still, however, and his posture remains relaxed.

"You're the Copycat," he says, letting go of Hannibal's hand and putting it back in his own lap. "I've known that for some time, now."

Hannibal smiles and pulls away, bringing his gaze back to the fire.

"Tell me more, then."

Will lets out a long breath, like he's been holding it for an eternity. He glances over at Hannibal's lap again, eying Calypso, who still is fast asleep.

"I knew that you eat people, but I didn't know how you got them." His lips curl into a smile, either joyful or disbelieving. "I knew it when I knew you were the Copycat. You knew Hobbs, you were like him."

"Am I?" he asks. "You despise Hobbs, Will."

"But I don't despise you." Will laughs, and it's shaky, breathless, *alive*. "You hunt like he did, but not for the same reason. You killed to show me what Hobbs did, to lead me to him. You warned Hobbs so that we would find him and I could kill him."

Swallowing, Hannibal nods. He can feel a strange euphoria building in him, and it emanates off of Will, too.

"You wanted to teach me--in so many different ways. And you have." Will takes a deep breath and puts his hand on Hannibal's knee, his grip tight. "I didn't know if I was crazy, if I was imagining it--if I was projecting onto you. But when--when I saw Nolak, I knew."

Calypso twitches in Hannibal's lap, making a squeaking sound.

The both of them are pulled from the stupor made from Will's hushed confessions as the pup stirs. Will quickly takes his hand from Hannibal's knee and picks her up, cradling to his chest.

"Nightmare. I bet she dreams of the dog fights," Will murmurs, glancing at Hannibal. "She's seen them, hasn't she? That's where you found her."

Hannibal nods, watching the way Will holds the dog. She's a rag doll in his arms, only barely awake. He stands and places her on the couch to continue her sleep, and Hannibal doesn't protest. Will remains standing, but extends a hand to Hannibal, who takes it and rises.

They stand, facing each other, hand in hand, and Hannibal isn't entirely sure what to do, but then Will continues his narrative.

"Nolak--I saw him days after you came to my house, and it clicked. You wanted me to see Hobbs before, and you were--you were amused by what I did. And when the Egalitarian was going to come after you, of course you would do something. But it was more than that--you wanted me to stop looking at the Egalitarian, and you wanted me to see you, so I could amuse you again."

"Will." Hannibal takes his free hand and lifts it to Will's cheek, holding it there. Even his face is cold, still. "You do so much more than just amuse me."

Will swallows, closing his eyes as he continues.

"When we had dinner that night, I knew. And thinking about the way you held me the night you killed Nolak, when you came to see me--I was confused. I didn't know what I felt, but I had known all along that it wasn't bad. When we drank, when we talked, I thought I wanted you, but you--you didn't want me. But I couldn't leave."

Hannibal's breath hitches, and he moves his hand to run his fingers along Will's jaw, to feel the grain of his stubble. "I wanted you," he says, and his eyes focus on Will's lips. "I have since I saw your potential."

Will's eyes open, a ferocity blazing behind them, stronger than a thousand furnaces. "And I have since I saw yours."

It doesn't sound real. Will, precious Will, who has always fought to catch killers, who has despised them and feared them and feared becoming like them, wants Hannibal.

Even though he knows. *Because* he knows.

Hannibal has always figured it would take a little more work than this.

Will grins, and lets go of Hannibal's hand, placing both of his on Hannibal's hips, his grip light but sure. "And then I realized, that morning before the gallery, that I didn't just *think* I wanted you." He glances at Hannibal's other hand, still touching his face. "It scared me more than knowing you were the Copycat did, and I almost didn't come back."

Hannibal doesn't ask where Will might have gone. He only listens, moving to run his fingers through Will's hair.

"But I did, and I realized that we work well together, that it's not so bad to want you. Not when we can be strong together." Will takes another deep breath, bold and alive and so much more vivid than he normally is.

And Hannibal feels washed out, weak.

Overwhelmed.

He can't do anything but listen and feel.

"When you called, I thought something had happened, that maybe you knew I knew. You sounded afraid, and I didn't entirely believe there was a dog. I thought you were luring me into something, that--"

Hannibal laughs, unable to stop himself.

"You're the one who lures, Will. I pursue."

"I know." Will moves infinitesimally closer. "I realized that today, when I saw your display in the subway. You hunted Barcet. There was no need to draw him in. You pounced and you destroyed." He takes a deep breath, and the rest comes out as an exhale, all at once.

"You cut open his chest and you stole his heart and you showed me what I had done to you and what we had done to each other and I realized that I didn't have stitches in my lips and I could tell you that--"

Hannibal can't listen any longer.

He pulls Will's face close to his and silences him with a kiss, closing in on his lower lip. He expects to be able to take Will's mouth and devour it, but Will proves that there are indeed no stitches in his lips and fights back.

It's for just a few seconds, and then Will breaks off.

Smiling, Hannibal says, "I hadn't quite meant to tell you all *that* when I killed him."

Will grins. "Part of you did," he whispers, just barely close enough that Hannibal can feel the breath of the words on his lips.

He blinks, expectant.

"You're the Ripper, Hannibal, and so much more. I can see all of you."

That grin is stretched wide on Will's face, a hunger behind his eyes. He's hesitant, however, as if he's unsure what to do or how to instigate anything. His hands are still resting on Hannibal's hips, irresolute, but his eyes are fixed on Hannibal's mouth, and the grin slowly fades into more of a pout.

Hannibal thinks he's quite pleased with that.

He brings their lips together again, bunching Will's curls in his fingers as he holds the back of his head. It's a surface-level thing; Hannibal more pecks at Will than anything else, delighting in their nearness above all. He finds himself pressing kisses to Will's jaw, his cheek, his hairline, caught up in a boyish excitement.

Will lets it happen, smiling again, moving his hands further up Hannibal's back and drawing him closer. As Hannibal brings a lingering kiss to the corner of his mouth, he says, "I knew you wanted to be seen."

Hannibal, clutching Will's face in his hands, nods, his nose rubbing against Will's cheek as he does so. He doesn't want to pull away, to break their touch again.

Still close, he whispers, "Tell me what *you* are, Will. Let me see you."

Will sighs, his breath hot on Hannibal's face.

"I don't know what I am," he confesses. "I've--I've always had thoughts, desires to kill. It's what brought me into law enforcement; I thought I could fight it that way."

A yearning fills Hannibal at the words. "But it only made the desires stronger, didn't it, Will?" he asks, and takes Will's bottom lip again. He runs his tongue along it, pulling away just as Will begins to reciprocate, chasing his lips.

"No," Will answers, fixated on Hannibal's mouth. "Not until I killed Hobbs. Then it got out of hand." He sighs and looks up, meeting Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal strokes Will's cheek before letting go of him. They still need to talk, despite everything he wants to do instead. Taking a moment to memorize Will's expression (parted lips, dilated pupils, slightly glassy eyes, smooth, tension-free skin), he steps back, breaking their long but tentative embrace.

"You enjoyed killing Hobbs," he says, feeling blank, somehow, without Will against him.

"Terribly," Will confesses, and he ducks his head. "And after that, the more--the more dead bodies I saw, the more I wanted to do it again. I think seeing Nolak's body is what did it for me, knowing that I was so close to the man that had killed him. It pushed me over the edge."

"In a bad way? Or did you enjoy the fall?"

Will's lips purse, pouty but hangdog.

"Both," he says, his gaze flicking nervously from Hannibal's eyes, to his mouth, to his hands. "I wanted to kill, but I wanted to kill with you, too. I wanted to *be* with you. I hadn't expected that."

"You began to desire me when you saw that I could fulfill your needs, then." Hannibal isn't sure how that makes him feel. Heat fills him, but it's neither angry or lustful. "Your more... bloodthirsty needs."

"Yes and no." Will shoves his hands in his pockets, suddenly meek. "When I realized you were the Copycat, I wanted to be your protege. When I noticed the artful way you killed, the beauty in how you destroyed, I wanted more. When I discovered that you were the Ripper, I *needed* it, to be more

than just a protege." He shrugs, a small smile on his face as he looks away. "But I hadn't expected this. For you to--to *desire* me."

"Oh, Will." Hannibal shakes his head, chuckling to himself. "I have since the beginning. I'm so glad you've begun to feel the same."

Will nods, eagerly, but keeps the distance between them. "When I thought I knew what you were, when I still thought I was just making it up, I didn't fully know what I wanted. When I knew for sure, I realized--"

"There's no need to explain further," Hannibal says, cutting him off. "I understand."

"I understand, too."

Hannibal clears his throat, a thought crossing his mind.

"Since we understand each other," he says, like the beginning of a proposal, "then I can assume you're comfortable with my dietary habits."

Will licks his lips, pensive.

"I'm not adverse."

They've returned to the kitchen, a safe distance between them. Hannibal is partially afraid that if he touches Will again he might lose control of himself, and part of him still isn't sure that all of this isn't a trap.

He doesn't think it, is though. Everything feels wonderfully real, his lips still tingling from the kisses they shared.

Hannibal goes through the contents of his refrigerator, searching for something appropriate to feed all *eight* of the dogs with.

Will watches over his shoulder, his breath shallow.

"How much of that is... is people?" he asks, an eagerness hidden there.

Hannibal glances over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow. "They're not people, Will. They're pigs."

"Oh." Will nods, licks his lips again. "Of course."

"Though, you might have issues developing that mindset, with your level of empathy." Hannibal finally decides he can sacrifice the duck for the sake of Will's animals. "But, there are no *pigs* in my refrigerator at present. We ate the remainder of the sausage at breakfast." He pauses, sensing Will's zeal. "There is, however, another location in the house where I do store more."

"Will I get to see it?"

"Later, Will," he promises, taking out the duck and setting it on the counter. "I have an abundance of duck at present, which we can feed to your dogs. If you require dinner yourself, and your tastes call for something more *hearty*, I can fetch us something from the basement."

Will nods, eagerly.

"I'm--I'm starving."

"I haven't eaten since our late breakfast," Hannibal confesses. "I could prepare something celebratory." He unwraps the poultry and begins to dissect the body into its useable parts.

Will leans on the counter, watching him. "No," he says, resolute. "I'm cooking tonight. And I'll want some of your heartier ingredients." He smirks as he says it, a dastardly thing that sends a sharp wire of heat through Hannibal.

He raises an eyebrow, suppressing it, and snaps off one of the duck's legs, the bone still somewhat flexible. "You want to cook, Will?"

He nods, watching as Hannibal continues to butcher the bird. "It's symbolic, I think," he murmurs. "We're companions now, equals, and that means we share. You feed my dogs for the night, and I feed you."

That same unidentifiable heat coils in Hannibal, and he can't help but smile.

"We switch roles, then."

Once the dogs' food is well on its way (fresh corn, carrots, duck, and collard greens all simmering in a pan), Hannibal decides to fetch the meat from the basement for Will.

"Is there anything in particular you have in mind?" he inquires before going down.

Will is resting with his elbows propped on the counter, his chin in his hands. He glances at Hannibal, a craving there.

"Do you have Johann Nolak's tongue?"

Hannibal blinks at him, slightly surprised.

"I do," he replies, "though I had intended to feed it to Jack Crawford."

Will stands straight and crosses over to Hannibal, reaching out so that his fingers ghost the exposed skin of Hannibal's forearm. It sends a chill through him to combat the heat.

He is fire, Will is ice.

"Jack doesn't deserve it," Will tells him, his eyes hooded as he watches his hand trace circles on Hannibal's skin. "You killed Nolak so I would look at you, and I did. That piece of him is ours, not Jack's."

"You really are intent on some sort of symbolism, aren't you?" hums Hannibal, very pleased.

Will drops his hand and kisses Hannibal's cheek, lingering there for a few seconds.

"Get the tongue," he whispers, stepping back.

Hannibal can't say no, not to that. He quickly slips away into the basement, his skin prickling with anticipation. He takes the tongue from the freezer, tightly encased in a plastic vacuum pack. As he hurries back upstairs, he half-expects Will to pounce on him with a knife and tell him that everything was just a trap.

But he doesn't.

When Hannibal returns to the kitchen, Will is dishing the dog food into the same shallow, clay bowls, careful how much he puts in each. He looks up as Hannibal enters, and says, "I'm just assuming these are the designated dog food bowls now."

"For now," Hannibal confirms, standing just behind him so that he can still see his face. "I can find something more suitable. I'm assuming this will be a regular occasion for us."

Will's cheeks flush pink, more noticeable now in the bright kitchen light than it might have been by the fire. "I would like that," he says, slightly leaning back into Hannibal.

"Good." Despite his concern towards the idea of regularly housing an entire pack of dogs, Hannibal looks forward to a close arrangement. He is content to watch Will for a moment longer as he continues to transfer the food from pan to bowls, the space between them minimal. The tongue, still frozen, seeps cold into Hannibal's hand, however, and it pulls him from his thoughts of domesticity. He sets it down on the counter. "I have what you asked for," he says, leaning close to Will's neck, breathing the words there. "What do you intend to cook with it?"

Will finishes distributing the last of the food, all of the other clay bowls lined out next to the stovetop. He takes the tongue set there, purple and cold and wrapped in plastic, and holds it in his hands as if it's a sacred relic.

"I'm thinking a jambalaya," he says, pressing his thumb against it. It barely gives into the pressure. "It's kind of like frozen chicken, if I ignore the color. Soft enough."

"I've never had tongue in jambalaya," Hannibal mumbles, still peering over Will's shoulder. He slides his hands around his waist, resting them on Will's stomach, which clenches and then relaxes under the touch.

"I don't think it's traditional," answers Will, leaning back into him. "Not that it matters."

Hannibal smiles, taking in the smell of Will. Beneath the declining odor of the chemicals from the forensic lab, he can smell the aftershave he gave him in the basket, and the dogs and everything else that is Will.

"I'm sure it will be wonderful."

Will makes a noise in the back of his throat, likely in agreement. He tilts his head back so his cheek rests against Hannibal's.

"This is intimate," he remarks, smiling.

"We've become quite intimate." Between the past two nights, intimacy would seem to be a norm.

"I like it. More than I thought I would." Will sets the tongue back on the counter and turns around so he can rest his head on Hannibal's chest and grip the front of his shirt. "I stick to my previous

statement, though. It's going to be weird in public."

Hannibal, unable to deny himself the opportunity, puts his hand back in Will's hair, running it through the dark locks. He really does enjoy it far too much.

"Stranger still, after this," he agrees, thinking of hiding everything again. The openness which he experiences now is too blissful to want to let go of. "We will be concealing instead of feigning."

Will hums, and then sighs. "If we--if we want to go further, beyond just this--"

"I certainly do," Hannibal tells him, slipping his hand to the base of Will's neck so he can massage the muscles there.

"Yes." Will shifts slightly, standing a little taller, gripping the fabric of Hannibal's shirt. "But we don't tell Jack. It's still a charade to him."

"And to everyone else?"

"Realer than ever," Will breathes. "But Jack can't know. He would be suspicious of me. I've been working hard to hide any interest in you--*intimately* or otherwise."

"And Alana, then," Hannibal says. "I had to tell her the night you spent here. She was suspicious of my intentions."

"Rightfully so?" Will queries, lifting his head so that he looks into Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal smiles and runs his thumb over Will's cheekbone.

"You should start preparing that jambalaya."

Hannibal refuses to let all of the dogs eat in his kitchen, so he brings the food outside for them. Somehow resisting their own animalistic greed in favor of compatibility, they all eat the aptly sized portion Will intended for them.

Hannibal doesn't know how or why; Will is still in the kitchen when Hannibal gives it to them, and yet they somehow each gravitate to the bowl that corresponds best with their size.

Well trained, he supposes.

He lets Calypso eat with the older dogs. Winston seems to keep guard over her, introducing her to the rest of the pack. They take to her quickly, none being too abrasive with her.

She is hesitant around them, likely not used to being around so many other (friendly) dogs. Hannibal feels obligated to sit outside and watch over her, despite the cold. He sits on one of the chairs on the patio, the lights on, watching them.

Will comes outside for a short while, as the jambalaya is simmering. Hannibal can smell the paprika on him, and the fresh herbs from Hannibal's indoor garden cling to his presence like an aura. The stink of the forensic lab has washed away from him almost entirely, replaced by the palatable scents of Hannibal's kitchen.

He's brought out his coat for him.

"You left it on the hanger," he says, quietly. "I didn't want you to be cold."

Hannibal takes it, touched by the simple gesture. Just a few days ago, none of this would have felt possible. Now, in the fever or a new-found rapport, he's enthralled by the idea that Will is there for him to touch and be touched by.

Pulling the coat on, he remains seated, and Will stands next to him. They watch the dogs, whom have all now finished their food, tumble together and wander the winter bound garden.

Will's hand rests on the back of Hannibal's chair, tapping against the wood absently. There's a buzz to his energy, as if he's waiting for something, but Hannibal can't tell what. He's caught up in his own head, wondering at the shift between them.

Idly, he says, "I don't typically eat food prepared by other people."

The words slide casually off of his tongue, but he feels a private anxiety about them. He has a multitude of reasons why he doesn't let others cook for him, and all of them have suddenly become null in his desire to do as Will asks.

He wants Will to know the gravity of that, how quickly he's slipping from his ways.

How much he trusts Will.

"I've noticed," Will answers, quietly. "But if it makes you feel better, all the ingredients are yours."

"I suppose." Hannibal bites his lip, tentative. In an attempt at humor, he says, "My palate *is* very sophisticated, you know. I will be critical of your mistakes."

Will chuckles. "As long as the criticism is constructive," he replies. "This *is* my first attempt at cooking with your variety of pork, after all."

Smiling, Hannibal hopes that it won't be the last.

"I have faith you'll do well."

The jambalaya is not a beautiful thing to look at, the way that Will has prepared it, but the scent is heavenly.

The taste, too, is divine. Hannibal has a wry feeling that he wouldn't have thought so if anyone else had prepared it, but the thought that Will created this dish with his own hands, with him and him alone in mind, makes it wonderful.

The tongue, as predicted, has a strong flavor thanks to Johann Nolak's last-minute struggle. It somehow mingles nicely with the rest of the flavor, however.

They eat it out on the porch with the dogs, the night air sharp and cool. The scents of the garden intermix with that of the food, and Hannibal is reminded once more of how much Will's presence has altered his behavior.

Will has him underneath his thumb.

He's fallen victim to the exact thing which he feared, but now, he doesn't find it so terrifying. Will can do what he wants with him, because Hannibal trusts him, because Hannibal hungers for him.

Will has done the impossible to Hannibal, and can do what he wishes now that he has him on a leash.

They speak quietly into the night, until the moon begins to sink below the horizon.

They say nothing of importance, though everything shared feels monumental. Every new piece of information is cherished both ways, something to be remembered and valued.

Will asks that the dogs sleep in the house; it's too cold to do otherwise.

Hannibal lets them, and they all pile together on the floor in front of the fireplace.

The two men retire to separate rooms--Hannibal to his own, and Will to the guest room he occupied once before. It's unspoken, and certainly silently questioned, but Hannibal understands.

His sleep is restless, both from his satisfaction with the unexpected events of the evening and the new, relentless hunger that burns within him like a hot fire.

A furnace.

Convoitise

Chapter Notes

Bummed because I had written this entire chapter and then forgot to back it up in my document, so I have to rewrite it now. Sigh.

I'm so behind on writing, aaaaaaahhhh...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hannibal wakes to the sound of movement down the hall, and he is momentarily alarmed.

The first thing he remembers is Will's knowledge, only shortly followed with the wash of reassurance that comes with recalling Will's accompanying acceptance.

He lays in bed listening to the sound of running water, and still doesn't move when it stops, when Will gets dressed. He remains still when he hears footsteps approaching, and then a quiet knock on his door.

He stretches himself languidly, but remains under the covers.

"Come in," he says, through a (slightly deliberate) yawn.

One of the double doors opens just enough for Will to slip through. He's fully clothed, in a different outfit from the day previous: thick black and gray plaid flannel, dark blue jeans, and his working boots.

He takes in the room first--its size and decoration--before his eyes fall on Hannibal, still nestled against his pillows and secreted beneath the blankets.

Hannibal feels Will's intrigued gaze on him as he walks to the bed, his boots sounding against the floor.

"Quite the den you've got here," Will murmurs, coming to a stop as he stands beside the bed. There's still enough distance between them that Hannibal still couldn't touch him if he reached out.

"I can't determine your tone," replies Hannibal, rolling onto his side.

He lets the sheets fall just so that Will can see that Hannibal is shirtless. Knowing how weak Will makes him only drives him to do the same in return.

However, Will doesn't seem particularly affected--though he does smile slightly when his eyes land on Hannibal's clavicle.

"I can't say I've found anything other than what I'd expected," he chuckles, and sits down on the edge of the bed.

Hannibal wonders if he'll make a habit of repeating his words back to him, and moves closer so that they may touch if they choose. Lazily, he says, "Have you spent much time developing expectations for my bedroom, Will?"

With a slight exhale, Will's face again flushes that lovely shade of pink, like a bouquet of delicate carnations. "I don't think I'd gotten that far," he admits, and slides an hand over towards Hannibal, upturning his palm in welcome.

Hannibal moves so that he can rest his face on it, letting Will's cool fingers press against his cheek and hairline.

"It's understandable. Your own realization of want is a recent thing," he supposes with a sigh.

Will smiles and retracts his hand, placing it in his lap. "But not yours. You've imagined having me here?"

Finding the question almost laughable, Hannibal says, "Of course." He imagines it now, pulling Will from the edge of the bed and into him, forcing off those wretched boots and shabby clothes to reveal the beauty beneath.

He would do it, if he thought Will would let him.

But the other man seems careful, more reserved than the night before. His position on the edge of the bed speaks to a strong hesitance, perhaps not unwarranted in their situation.

He wants to tell Will that he's welcome to do whatever he wants, but he knows that he should try and maintain what little authority he's left for himself. Better to leave Will unbeknownst to his own powers.

If he is at all unaware in the first place, that is.

"It's early," Hannibal adds, regarding the gray light filling the room, "and you're fully dressed. Do you plan on leaving?"

Will nods, contrite. "Jack called again. To my dismay."

Hannibal rolls his eyes, not at all inclined to hide any fraction of his distaste now that Will knows what he is. "He will suck you dry with this work, and he doesn't care of the consequences."

"And you would have me not work at all?"

Will's eyebrows are raised, amused but challenging.

"I see no danger for myself in your assisting the FBI," he answers, his eyes narrowing with the meaning of the words, "but I do fear for your own safety. This work tires you, does it not?"

"Mm." Will sighs and turns, laying his back onto the bed so his head is perpendicular to Hannibal's, their bodies creating a v-shape connecting at their temples. "Sometimes. It... creates a dilemma. Part of me wants to make sure that they all go to prison, part of me wants to rip their throats out and turn them into something beautiful, less despicable."

Hannibal's heart skips a beat.

"Would you turn me into something beautiful, Will?" he asks, nearly breathless. The thought isn't entirely unappealing. He wants to know what Will would do to him, how he might arrange his corpse.

Will doesn't hesitate with his answer.

"No," he says. "I see no point in ending someone who only brings more beauty into the world."

"You find my work beautiful?" he asks, and turns his head so he can press his lips to Will's ear. "Or am I the beautiful one?"

He thinks Will shivers, or perhaps he imagines the slight shudder passing through the mattress.

"Both," he breathes. "I want you to teach me. I don't want you to die."

"You would set me apart from the other murderers that haunt your dreams?"

"I don't need to," Will says. "You're already a creature of your own."

"And I would gladly make you like me, Will," he purrs. He pushes back the covers and pulls himself closer to Will, throwing an arm over his chest to hold him possessively. He whispers into Will's ear: "Nothing would please me more."

A gentle laugh makes Will's chest rise and fall erratically. "I want to kill the killers. The ones without beauty, without your magnificence." He laughs again, harder this time. "Isn't that fucked up?"

"No, no," Hannibal assures him. "I think there's beauty in that itself. Your desire to eliminate that which only harm speaks miles of your character."

Will smiles. "God," he mutters. "I needed to hear that. Even if it's coming from you."

"Is it less credible coming from the mouth of the Chesapeake Ripper?"

"No." A small sound comes from the back of Will's throat. "God, no."

Hannibal smiles and buries his face in the crook of Will's neck, kissing there while he clutches him. His skin tastes clean from his shower, tastes as wonderful as he smells, and Hannibal can't help himself. He wants to work against the skin there so he can leave a mark--lips, tongue teeth...

He barely has the chance to leave more than a single pink mark when Will moves away, a sigh escaping him.

"I do have to go," he murmurs. "As much as I would like you to continue that."

Sighing as well, Hannibal releases him, letting him sit up. "What does Jack want from you today?"

"Another crime scene," Will answers.

"The Egalitarian?" he asks, brow furrowed.

"No," Will murmurs. "Someone else, apparently. I don't have the details yet, but Jack said it was bad." He gives Hannibal a strange look. "It's here in Baltimore, too."

Hannibal sits up, too, propping himself against the headboard. "It wasn't me," he assures him.

"I didn't think so." Will shakes his head. "That makes three that Jack has me after."

"Four, in his eyes," Hannibal reminds him. "He doesn't see the Ripper and the Copycat as one." Pointedly, he adds, "And I do think it would be best to keep it that way."

"Of course." Will stands up, his fingers raising to touch the place where Hannibal's mouth had been. "I'll continue to keep him off your trail."

Simpering, pleased, Hannibal throws back the covers and rises from bed. "Continue?" he hums, tilting his head. He raises his arms above his head to stretch, for Will to see his shirtless form. He wants Will to melt the way that he could melt for him, were Will to simply show him exposed flesh.

Will's gaze darts over Hannibal's chest, curious, but nothing more. Without the previous night's rapture brought on by closeness and confession, Will seems much less affected by Hannibal.

Or, perhaps he's simply affected differently than what Hannibal is used to. He'll have to keep paying close attention--which, he thinks, won't be a difficult task.

"Yeah, continue." Will crosses his arms and smiles. "I wouldn't want to say anything to bust you, Hannibal. I'll do my best to keep you on Jack's good list."

Chuckling, crossing over to him, Hannibal says, "I'm afraid you'll have to do more than just that to keep me on Jack's 'good list.'"

"Hm?" Will's eyes seem to light up.

Hannibal nods and puts his hand on Will's upper arm, feeling the muscle there. "Jack says he doesn't want me distracting you."

"He wants my head in the game," Will agrees. He's looking at Hannibal's hand on him, looking slightly pleased.

"And he believes my affections could distract you from your work."

Eyebrows raised, Will says, "Jack knows about your *affections*?" The last word is said with a teasing lilt, as if Will doesn't think it's a suitable descriptor.

"Unfortunately, he seemed to register them a while back," confesses Hannibal, ignoring Will's quirky tone. "He claims it was the reason he asked for my assistance with the Egalitarian case. Whether he was trying to assist me or simply take advantage of my desires, I've yet to determine." He feels his expression darken with the thought, taking the moment to consider how he could punish a Jack that thought Hannibal was something to be taken advantage of.

The fact that the special agent thinks he can take advantage of Will's brilliant mind is enough to warrant a considerable amount of suffering.

But not yet.

Will lets out a laugh, that little huff of his that slowly gets to Hannibal like drizzling rain on a forest fire.

Hannibal doesn't want to spend too much time dwelling on that particular metaphor.

"Knowing Jack," says Will, "it's both."

"Well." Hannibal clears his throat, forcing a smile as he deliberates on ways he could make Jack suffer. "I shouldn't distract you much longer, whether or not he knows you're here."

Will nods. "I'll let you know what I see."

Hannibal only hopes that there's not a new murderer to occupy Will's precious headspace.

Will keeps the dogs at Hannibal's house for another day.

He isn't sure what to do about them when he's at work, but he doesn't feel comfortable with hiring a sitter. No one is allowed in his home without his presence.

He lets all seven of Will's dogs stay in the yard, hoping that their good training will keep them from destorying his garden.

He takes Calypso with him to his office, where his eleven o'clock patient (a horribly anxious man named Harrison) holds her and coos as he stands by Hannibal's desk, asking what made him decide to get a therapy dog.

"I mean, n-not that it's a bad idea," Harrison says, pressing her against his chest. "Dogs can really calm people down."

Hannibal tilts his head. Harrison holds Calypso limply, like how a child might hold a newborn cousin, and Hannibal can't help but compare him to Will, who cradled her with nothing in mind but her comfort.

A small, unwarranted voice in the back of his head tells him that anyone and anything will dull to him when compared to Will.

"I hadn't, yet," he admits, adjusting himself in his seat. "But Harrison, please. Sit down."

The jumpy patient complies, and Calypso, the gracious creature she is, falls asleep in his lap. Harrison is much more collected during their session because of it, soothed by the little creature in his lap.

When Harrison leaves, quieted and even relaxed, Hannibal wonders if he should consider regularly brining Calypso to his sessions. Most people are lulled into a state of relaxation when allowed the comfort of an animal in clinical environments, after all.

People tend to be much more tolerable (and pliable) when relaxed.

He mulls it over as he eats the lunch he prepared that morning. The butternut squash soup is still warm thanks to the thermos, and the scent of sage fills the room as he slowly eats it.

Calypso neglects her own lunch, a small portion of what she and the other dogs had been given that morning, in favor of sniffing around Hannibal's office. He keeps a careful eye on her, making sure

she doesn't make any messes. He took her out to relieve herself after Harrison left, so she should be fine.

She's a mellow dog, and though he can't be certain, he thinks she might stay that way. She would be an excellent dog to help him with his patients, if so many people weren't irrationally afraid of pitbulls.

For now, most everyone will see her as a harmless, bumbling puppy. He sees no issue in taking advantage of her presence.

Hannibal's last appointment of the day ends at three thirty, and his thoughts are far from his patients.

He's spent the afternoon contemplating the Egalitarian. Will has been to three crime scenes in the past two days, and has likely worn himself thin. Hannibal supposes the least thing he can do is provide information on one of his competitors.

Jeremy Gaul's shop is closer to downtown than Hannibal's office, nestled in next to a collection of boutiques--all of which Hannibal has visited at some point or another.

He parks his Bentley directly in front of Gaul's shop, which is minimally decorated, besides the black and gold sign that hangs over the front window. It has nothing but the man's name on it, a nod to his arrogance.

Hannibal gets out of the car, carrying Calypso in one of the canvas bags he ordinarily reserves for groceries. Her head sticks out of the top, and while it looks far from comfortable with the fabric pressing into her neck, it's all Hannibal can provide for now.

The glass of the door has business hours printed in gold italics, and Hannibal doesn't need to check them to know that it's open. A couple stands pressed together in front of a display case full of rings, and Gaul himself stands behind the counter, watching them with a mild expression.

Hannibal opens the door, which chimes as he enters. He's immediately satisfied when the scent of the shop confirms what he already knows to be true.

Calypso wriggles in her bag, and Hannibal hushes her before looking up to greet Gaul, who's straightened himself to welcome him. His eyes fall on the puppy in the bag, but he doesn't say anything.

"Hannibal Lecter!" he says, eyebrows raised. "I didn't think I'd see you in here again."

Providing a stiff smile, Hannibal imagines how sly the other man must feel. He was planning to kill Hannibal not two weeks before, and he thinks Hannibal is none the wiser.

"How could I avoid the best jeweler in the state?" he returns. He drifts over to the watch display, not actually giving them any notice.

"With negligence," Gaul says. "But you're hardly negligent, are you, Hannibal?" He smiles and leans on the counter. "What can I do for you today?"

Hannibal lingers in front of the watches a moment, and then turns to join Gaul at the counter.

"I'm considering purchasing a gift," he says, raising an eyebrow. "Perhaps you have suggestions?"

Hannibal isn't really considering it, but he does need an excuse to be in the shop.

Any gifts he gives to Will, he thinks, will be made with his own hands, and not by those of a sub-par killer. He bites the inside of his cheek to prevent his lip from curling as he imagines Gaul getting any further into Will's head.

It would be best to apprehend him quickly.

In the seconds that Hannibal is deep in thought, Gaul's expression has also been pensive.

The corner of his mouth quirks upwards, a self-satisfied smirk.

"I had heard about your new darling," he replies, crossing his arms. "What kind of gift would this be, exactly?" His beady eyes have a quiet malice in them; Hannibal is unsettled.

His hand tightens on the strap of Calypso's bag. The pup seems to have settled herself, and is napping once more.

"What makes you think the gift is for a *darling*?" he asks, tilting his head.

"Jewelry is for lovers," Gaul replies, smiling. "Especially what I make. No one comes here to buy a gift for a friend or a relative." He glances over towards the couple still doting over the rings together. "And even if it were so, Doctor Lecter, you don't exactly have either."

At that, Hannibal bristles.

"I wasn't aware that you were an expert on my social standing, Mr. Gaul," Hannibal returns.

Gaul shrugs, both eyebrows raised. "My expertise is not refined to my craft."

Hannibal can't help but wonder if Jeremy Gaul took it upon himself to stalk Hannibal when he first pegged him as a victim.

He's only comforted by the thought that Gaul is nothing more than an eel. Ugly, wicked, slimy, but not at all intelligent. He wouldn't have been able to determine Hannibal's own extracurricular activities.

"I suggest you continue to focus your expertise on your jewelry, Jeremy," Hannibal sighs. "The art suits you better than any other."

After all, the Egalitarian's work is far from beautiful.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Gaul says, dipping his head. "Would you like to look around, or would you like suggestions?"

"I'll peruse the shop on my own for now, thank you."

Hannibal turns away and returns to the area with the watches, this time going to the left, where beautiful bracelets and bands are on display. Silver, of course, is the primary material, but he finds himself intrigued by a few platinum pieces.

But with Calypso's bag weighing on his shoulder, he is reminded that he is not here to look at jewelry. He doubts that there is anything in the shop that will direct him towards evidence to give to Will, but he's known what he must do from the beginning.

Despite knowing that the hostility he shares with Gaul is nothing new, the two of them share a mutual understanding of fine craftsmanship.

Things have never been smooth between them, but for the sake of getting the man out of Will's head and into a prison cell, Hannibal thinks they can reach a compromise.

He turns around to speak with Gaul again, only to notice another presence in the back of the shop.

He hadn't been able to sense it before; he had been so keen on recognizing the scent he knew would be there that he didn't think to pay heed to anything else. But it's there, now that he sees the shadow of a figure behind a half-closed door in the back end of the boutique.

The person in the back of the shop steps out of the back room, and Hannibal recognizes him from the night at the gallery. They make eye contact, and the young man's face is overcome by that same odd expression he showed during their last meeting.

"Hello," Hannibal says. "Weren't you the one that served me champagne the other night?" he inquires.

The young man (more of a boy, really), is a slight creature, with slicked back ginger hair and shallow eyes. Nodding carefully, he remains at the door to the back room, like a deer caught in the headlights.

"It's likely," he says, hesitantly, and Hannibal can sense the lie. "I see plenty of faces when I'm out serving champagne."

Gaul turns to address him, a smile curving on his face like an old scar. "Surely you'd remember a face like Doctor Lecter's," he laughs.

The boy smiles in turn, joining Gaul at the counter. "He looks like he carries some significance," he says, somewhat offhandedly. "But there's always similar faces. Always someone to be replaced by."

The words feel off the mark, and they strike Hannibal in a way he doesn't like.

"And what is your significance?" Hannibal queries, stepping closer. The glass counter still serves as a divider between them, but this close, he can smell him.

Or, not. The scent of the shop is overwhelming, and it's almost impossible to distinguish the boy's scent from Gaul's. There are slight differences, but the two stand too close for him to determine them.

He doesn't like it. Not one bit.

With an amiable grin, he adds, "There's no champagne being poured here."

The boy blinks. "Champagne isn't my only specialty. More of a side gig, really."

"Callum is my apprentice," Gaul explains, glancing at the boy from the corner of his eye. "He works for Valentine Catering when he isn't here to learn my art."

"Gotta pay my way through school somehow," the boy, Callum, adds. He's stiff. The way the boy holds himself around Gaul reeks of disdain, and yet he stands close.

Gaul, he notices, leans slightly into the boy. He breathes heavier now that the boy is near, and his eyes seem to flick towards him frequently. Callum stands still, taking it in stride.

Hannibal glances at the watch still on Callum's wrist, the one that he recognized when they first met at the gallery.

Gaul insisted that his jewelry was only for lovers. This boy is certainly aware of the weight of that.

Stowing that information away, Hannibal turns his head to regard the couple, who seem to have selected a ring and are approaching them at the counter.

"Well," he says, regarding Gaul, "I certainly wouldn't want to steal any more of your time. Perhaps you should join me for dinner this week, and we can discuss the details of what sort of gift I'm looking for."

"Something custom made, then?" Gaul purrs. "This darling must be something special."

Callum smiles and meets Hannibal's eyes.

"He does like his champagne, doesn't he?"

When Hannibal returns home, his driveway is empty, and Will's dogs are still in the backyard.

It's early in the evening, but he gives them their dinner anyway. He has half a mind to take them out to the park, but he trusts Will can do that.

But Will doesn't.

He doesn't come to Hannibal's home--not even to pick up his dogs.

Hannibal eats dinner alone that night, at his dining table, and he finds it quite stifling.

Lonely, too.

What on Earth has Will Graham done to him?

Sleep evades him.

He hadn't planned to kill the next victim of his sounder for another few nights, as the dinner itself is still over a week away, and he does prefer the meat to be fresh. But his concern for Will is coupled with an agitation with Jeremy Gaul and his unsavory attitude, and he can't stay in the house.

His kill, as always, has been preplanned, but he finds little enjoyment in the hunt.

Ahmale Jacobs (a young and particularly rude academic who he had the misfortune of encountering at the Library of Congress) is left spineless at the bottom of a shallow fountain.

Her refusal to delve any deeper beyond the constructs provided will be remembered by her colleagues and put on display by the Ripper.

Her upper vertebrae will serve as a charming substitute for oxtail in his stew.

It all does little to slake the feelings wrestling inside of him, snakes coiled together in a pit they all writhe to escape from.

He wants to hold Will again.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so I'm kind of a hot mess at the moment. Don't wanna get into it, but here's something I learned yesterday: don't ride your bike through a busy neighborhood when you're delirious from a fever.

So I'm posting (even though I don't have the whole next chapter written yet) as motivation to keep writing? Y'all just keep being great :')

(also I'm pretty sure I started writing this chapter like 2 weeks ago, ashamed to admit my brain train has left creation station)

Bienvenu

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hannibal returns home mid-afternoon the next day to find Will's car parked in his driveway.

He's had the day off, and so he slept in late, well-worn after the previous night's activities. The rest of the day was devoted to errands, carrying Calypso with him. He has managed to find a more suitable carrier for her, which will do until she is capable of walking on her own.

He hopes that will be soon.

As endearing as the little dog is, Hannibal is not fond of being known as the man with the *purse puppy*.

Will is nowhere to be found in the house, and the dogs are no longer in his yard, so Hannibal busies himself with cleaning his study. Help will come to deal with the rest of the house when he's home Friday afternoon, but this he can do himself.

He still aches with the same loneliness from the night before, but it settles as long as he keeps himself busy. He refuses to believe that he's become dependent on the other man in any way, and will not let any petty feelings prevent him from functioning normally.

Still, when Will returns nearly an hour later, a cool relief washes over Hannibal. The worry draining from him is only tangible when it's nearly gone, when he realizes that Will is safe and home and near.

Not only does he feel lacking without Will, but the powerlessness that comes with not being near him, with not being able to guarantee that he is safe, drains him also.

He watches from the window as Will goes first to the back garden and greets the dogs. The way that he immediately falls to his knees does something to Hannibal's heart.

Will greets every one of them individually, and they each wait their turn, surrounding him with wagging tails. He stays on the ground with them after, wrestling for a while until the large dog with the pointed ears (Felicity, if he recalls correctly) lays down on top of him. A few of the other dogs join the pile, and soon, only the smallest dog, Buster, is up. Will placates the energetic creature by tossing a small ball for it to fetch.

That goes on for a while. Winston leaves the pile, and so do Gretchen (the primarily black one) and Google (the one that reminds him of an off-brand poodle). Soon, most of the dogs are off mulling around, and Will stays on the ground.

He lays on his back against the cold, wintered earth. In his solitude, he looks at peace, if only marginally. Hannibal wonders what he is like when he fishes, or when he takes the dogs out in the woods in Wolf Trap.

He wonders if he's really at peace then, if he's ever relaxed at all.

When he sees Will leave the garden, Hannibal finds himself frozen by the window a while longer. The dogs continue to wrestle and play after Will is gone, and he is happy that they're there. Their presence creates a reason for Will to remain.

If they are to become a permanent fixture, however, Hannibal supposes he'll have to talk to the gardener about making the grounds more canine-friendly. His rose bushes, dead as they are in the cold of the winter, won't last when summer arrives.

But as long as the dogs are happy, Will is happy. Hannibal is willing to change almost anything if it means that Will stays.

Deep in thought and still at the window, he hears Will's footsteps on the staircase. Quickly, he regains himself and snatches up the duster so he can pretend to dust the bookshelves at the other end of the room. When he hears Will come closer and then stop in the doorway, he glances over his shoulder.

As usual, Will is haggard. He smells of sweat, sleep, and stress, and his shoulders sag with the weight of exhaustion.

"You weren't here last night," Hannibal remarks, turning back to his work.

Will scoffs and enters, slumping into a chair with a loud exhale.

"I had to go home," he says. "I've been busy, you know. And *you* aren't helping any."

Hannibal is soured by the tone in Will's voice: agitated and exhausted. He knows that Will did not go home the night before; the usual smell of woods and whiskey doesn't cling to him. He has a feeling that Will spent the night in a D.C. motel after a long day working for Jack.

And that makes him angry, makes him regret leaving Ahmale Jacobs in that fountain for Will to find.

"You never did tell me before about your latest adventures," Hannibal replies, doing his best to remain even. He turns around and goes to stand by Will's chair. "But you needn't if it distresses you."

He places a hand on Will's shoulder, who rests his head on it with a sigh.

"Same old," he mutters. "Cleaning up your mess today, mostly. But I did spend a fair amount of time dealing with a new case--the one I had to leave for yesterday. Which you'd know about if you were reading TattleCrime."

The last bit is bitter. Freddie Lounds, as per usual, is sticking her nose where it shouldn't be.

"I've been busy as well," Hannibal answers, keeping his voice soft.

"Oh, I know," Will groans, the picture of an overworked law enforcer.

Part of that is Hannibal's fault, and he decides to compensate with an impromptu massage. He places both hands on Will's shoulders and begins to knead into the tight muscles there.

Leaning into the touch (to Hannibal's sheer and unhinged delight), Will continues.

"Jack is *pissed*. He keeps insisting that we spend our time looking for the Ripper because we don't know when our next chance will be after the--after *your* final kill for this round."

He sighs, and Hannibal finds a large knot just above his shoulder blade. He digs in, kneading there purposefully, and Will groans again.

"But the rest of the team and I are telling him that we should be worried about the Egalitarian. He's still going strong, two a week. He's got to be breaking a record."

Hannibal just snorts. Gaul is no record breaker. Hannibal has taken far more lives than he, and done it more discreetly and artfully at the same time.

Smirking, he presses extra hard into the knot, which elicits another sound from Will.

"And what have you determined of the Egalitarian?" Hannibal asks, bending so he can lean closer to Will's face. "Are you close to catching him?"

Will turns his head slightly to see him, and then looks away.

"He's good, Hannibal. No evidence. Reminds me a bit of you, actually."

Hannibal removes his hands and stands up straight again. Stiffly, he says, "I am nothing like that man. He's pitiful, foul."

He thinks of Callum's discomfort, of Gaul's slimy expression.

"Have you considered the possibility of a muse?" he asks, clearing his head. "Someone lower class, perhaps. A gap between them. Perhaps the Egalitarian kills to close it."

Will pushes himself from the seat and faces Hannibal, frowning.

"Maybe." He crosses his arms and moves to lean against the side of the chair. "Doesn't really fit, though. You're more of the muse type."

"Ah." Hannibal smiles and turns him around so he can return to working at his shoulders, which are still painfully neglected. He could spent years working his hands in those shoulders, he thinks, and it still wouldn't make up for the lack of touch in Will Graham's life.

"So he and I aren't so alike?" he asks, rubbing circles with his thumbs into the muscles at the back of Will's neck.

"Guess not." Will pauses and then laughs, a throaty sound. His breathing has slowed. "You don't deny having a muse, though?"

"Should I?" Hannibal asks. He digs beneath Will's shoulder blades, relishing the closeness, the contact rough but intimate and even more fulfilling than the last night's work.

This is what he wanted then, this is what he needs now, what he will likely crave the minute they part again.

"I don't know," Will answers. He leans back slightly, his weight adding to the force of Hannibal's massage. "Depends, I guess. Am I your muse?"

Hannibal sighs and brings his hands lower on Will's back so they rest on his waist.

"If you would like to be, then yes."

"It's a yes or no question, Hannibal." There's a note of irritation in his voice. "The ball's more in your park this time."

Hannibal smiles. He has killed for Will before, in a sense, but never has he truly, fully devoted something to him. That could change, he thinks.

He's lost in thought for a moment, imagining what he could give to Will.

A secret thing, one for Will and Will alone. Nothing tainted with the FBI's forensic investigations, nothing to be drawn out and torn apart by Jack Crawford.

An elegant thing, for Will to admire and for time to destroy.

Red and black and gory and all for Will.

"Yes." Hannibal quickly presses a kiss to his jaw and steps away. Buzzing with creativity, he returns to pretend to dust at the books on the shelf.

He can feel Will's gaze piercing into him, but he doesn't say anything more.

He keeps his hands busy and his mind clear with the feather duster. Will stands behind him, watching, perhaps contemplating.

Hannibal is so far into his fantasy, his daydreams of creation, that he forgets the subject at hand and is partially surprised by Will's next question.

"What makes you think the Egalitarian has a muse?"

He freezes, and Callum's bright red hair flashes in his mind's eye, quickly replaced with Gaul's beady, hazel irises. The way that Gaul looked at the boy, besotted and hungry, could not be ignored.

"Speculation," Hannibal answers, and it isn't a lie.

Will huffs. "A hazy thing, speculation," he chuckles, as if pretending to be a stranger to conjecture. "But it would make sense. He's already made it clear he's self righteous. Atoning for something, fixing something..." Will shakes his head. "He has trouble... connecting with his muse. Likely for socioeconomic reasons, judging by his murders."

"And he connects his victims through death."

"Which means he'll probably kill his muse." Will swallows. "On the night of the ballet, given our timeline so far."

"It would make sense," Hannibal agrees. "If he's chosen half of his victims from that pool, then the event itself must be significant to him." He turns to look over his shoulder.

Will is still leaned against the side of the chair, frowning.

"That doesn't make sense, though," he mutters. "I just... If he's the rich one, and the final kill is his muse--and I really don't think we should be calling it that--then how is it connected with the ballet? All the others are..." He shakes his head. "Maybe I've got it wrong. Maybe he's not rich, maybe he's--"

Hannibal cuts him off with a sigh and sets down the duster.

"The Egalitarian is wealthy, Will. Don't waste your time scrounging around for a new profile."

Will's footsteps are heavy against the wood floor as he approaches Hannibal.

"And you're sure about that?" he asks, now leaning himself against the bookshelf.

Hannibal sighs again, but doesn't admonish him for it. "Quite."

A moment of silence. Hannibal keeps himself focused on dusting, repeating the same little motion over and over as he brushes the feathers over the tops of old books. Will's eyes tear into him, seeing through the facade.

"Hiding something, Hannibal?" Will's smile is pointed, mischievous. Stirring, really.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow and sets down the duster. His hands fall to his sides as he turns to Will, who now stares fixedly at his nose.

"Not at all," he answers. "I'm an open book, for you."

"God." Will rolls his eyes, but the smile remains. "Do you know who the Egalitarian is, Hannibal?"

Hannibal smirks in return. He sees no reason to hide anything from Will, not at this point, but he enjoys their conversational games.

"I do," he says, "but the evidence I have against him is nothing you could present to Jack."

"Of course," Will snorts, looking away. He raises a hand to run his fingers along the spine of a book. "How *do* you know, then?"

Hannibal purses his lips, noting the title of the book.

Les Fleurs du mal.

"Unfortunate circumstances," he says, doing his best to remain undistracted. A few stray words from it come to mind (*«Ce jeu féroce et ridicule, quand doit-il finir?»*), but he casts them off quickly for their irrelevance. "He got to my dinner before I could."

"You stumbled upon each other, then?"

"Not at all. I found him. He knows nothing of my own habits."

"And who is he?"

Hannibal smiles. "Jeremy Gaul. I'm having him over for dinner this weekend, if you'd like to join us. It would be for the case, after all."

Will simply raises his eyebrows, but it's an agreement.

Before the sun goes down, Will leaves to take the dogs out to the park.

He takes Calypso with him, too. Hannibal hasn't yet told him that he thinks of the pup as his own, now. He fears Will might be too smug about that.

In Will's absence, Hannibal takes the time to read. He finds himself drawn to the book that Will touched, *Le Fleurs du mal*.

The Flowers of Evil.

A collection of French poetry by Charles Baudelaire, all of it morbid and romantic. Hannibal had been intrigued by the poems as a young man, but had never been able to connect with them fully.

He skims over a few poems, lost in the familiarity of them. The words' wonted cadence bring him back to his early days at John Hopkins, bringing him to remember the thin strings of what he had, at the time, considered to be love.

The poetry is so strongly connected to those memories, however, that he can't seem to glean anything else from them. They only make him restless.

He finds the poem that came to mind during his conversation with Will, and reading it in full only fills him with discomfort.

"Love and the Skull" only chills him, makes him think of Jack Crawford, the way he so painlessly drains Will with work. No matter who dies, no matter how vengeful Jack seems to be, he is only strengthened by his work.

*Car ce que ta bouche cruelle
Eparpille en l'air,
Monstre assassin, c'est ma cervelle,
Mon sang et ma chair!*

And Hannibal is unsettled.

He almost shuts the book, almost gives up, but he turns to one final, random page.

He is not disappointed.

La Muse malade, a poem he remembers neglecting in the past, shines on the page like a beacon. He runs his fingers along the letters, drawn in by the words. He reads it over once, twice, three times, and is left to reflect.

*Ma pauvre muse, hélas! qu'as-tu donc ce matin?
Tes yeux creux sont peuplés de visions nocturnes,
Et je vois tour à tour réfléchis sur ton teint
La folie et l'horreur, froides et taciturnes.*

And indeed, his muse is haunted by madness, indeed are Will's eyes filled with the shadows of nightmares.

*Je voudrais qu'exhalant l'odeur de la santé
Ton sein de penses forts fût toujours fréquenté*

Hannibal closes his eyes and finally shuts the book, setting it on his lap. He runs his fingers along the book's spine, where Will's own traced just an hour before.

What can he do for Will? How can he bring him health, nourishment?

His head provides him a million answers, and for the first time in weeks, his heart is silent. The beasts within him, love and anger and jealousy and fear, remain quiet, unwilling to bring forth any reactions.

He simply broods until Will returns, alone in his study with the words of a dead, angsty, French poet.

When the sun is down and the sky is stretching between dusky orange and purple, Hannibal waits for Will on the porch behind the house.

His garden, tame and demure compared to the field that he knows spreads out behind Will's own home, soaks in the twilight. The frozen earth and the resulting brown and gold plants speak to a lack of resilience.

The scattered evergreens, which are there purely to bring color to the muted winter garden, stand silent and reserved.

Hannibal regards them, lost not in thought, but in a quiet meditation. He takes note of every muscle in his body, of every fiber of fabric against his skin, of every scent and sound in the air.

He is pulled from his reflection first by the sound of his gate opening, and then of the tread of too many paws. Will's own steps sound behind them.

Hannibal's eyes open, and he watches Will's approach. His shoulders sway as he walks, his steps are easy.

He looks at least somewhat at ease.

"Welcome back," Hannibal calls. He remains seated, warmed at the sight of his muse, who is, perhaps, not so sick after all. "Should I start preparing our dinner?"

Will steps up onto the porch, his boots thumping against the wood. The dogs (none of them leashed) hang behind him, not yet dispersed. He holds Calypso against his chest, her head over his shoulder.

"Please, no," he says, biting his lip. His face is dusky like the sunset, and his form beneath his warm bundle of clothing is stark against the washed out colors of the sleeping garden.

"Are you tired of my cooking?" Hannibal asks, unsure if he's offended, or if he should be.

At that, Will offers a conciliatory smile. "No. Not exactly," he says, shrugging. Offering Calypso to him, he adds, "Come with me?"

Hannibal takes her without thinking, gets to his feet.

"Where to?"

Will leads him back to the front of the house before he answers. As he loads the dogs into his car, he says, "I need to go home for a little while."

Hannibal watches as the seven of them pile in, each to what seems to be a designated spot. Even the passenger seat is taken; the large and brown male dog, Juniper, sits there, thumping his tail and looking back at Will with a lolling tongue.

Will snaps his fingers. "Down, come on. That's not your seat tonight."

Hannibal blinks and watches as Will gets into the driver's seat. He stands in front of the car, washed over with an odd sensation.

"You want me to come with you?"

"Yes," Will answers. He jerks his head towards the passenger seat. "Get in. It'll be dark soon."

Hannibal can't help but smile. He wants to argue that he doesn't have his coat, that he should at least pack an overnight bag, but he can't. He's overwhelmed.

Will has never *invited* Hannibal to his home.

"Get in," Will repeats, rolling his eyes. He leans over to open the passenger door from the inside.

With Calypso barely awake in the crook of his arm, Hannibal enters the car and takes his seat. He places her in his lap and closes the door, fastens his seatbelt as Will pulls out of the driveway.

He's both thrilled and terrified of the spontaneity of Will's offer, and they barely speak for the hour and a half it takes them to get to Wolf Trap.

Will turns on the radio, and classic rock plays at a low volume. The dogs shuffle around behind them only occasionally; they more or less remain still and calm for the ride.

They are all enclosed by the tranquil little world within Will's car.

It's a pleasant place to be.

Towards the end of the drive, when the sky has gone from indigo to inky black and the stars have come to full realization, Will speaks up.

"Do you think I stretch myself too thin, Hannibal?"

Hannibal is not startled by the lack of warning preceding the question so much as its nature, but he answers quickly and smoothly regardless.

"I don't think it's you doing the stretching." He turns his head to Will directly instead of continuing to regard him surreptitiously from the corner of his eye. "Other people--myself included, I fear--

demand too much of you. And due to your empathy, you find yourself unable to deny those demands."

Will nods, his eyes still trained on the winding road ahead of them. The headlights overwhelm the pavement, and the long-faded yellow paint barely reflects the light back.

"I'm not a slave to it, you know. My empathy." Will glances over at him quickly, and his eyes flicker back to the road before Hannibal can catch his gaze. "I can choose who I help. I can choose who gets into my head."

Hannibal sighs. "Can you?" he asks, and his brow furrows involuntarily. "I see you slip in and out of exhaustion, lost in the heads of unworthy monsters. You lose sleep, lose your time, lose your health." He clenches his jaw as Jeremy Gaul's face glides into his mind's eye, greedy and licentious.

Will notices his discomfort and responds with a small, irritated moan. He remains silent a moment longer as he turns onto the dirt road leading to his house.

"I do it because I choose to," he says. "If Jack didn't think he had me on a leash, people like Freddie Lounds would have a much easier time pegging me as a psychopathic murder. If I wasn't there to catch those *unworthy monsters*, they would still be loose--making a muck of what could be an art form.

"You look at me like I'm falling apart, Hannibal. I'm not. Maybe in another life, I would be. Maybe killing Hobbs would have undone me, maybe I would have lost it then. But I latched onto something, I realized something. I looked at what I had done, and I was afraid of it, but I think I knew I didn't have to be."

Will smiles and takes a longer glance at Hannibal.

"If I was afraid, I'd be falling apart. But I'm not. I know what I can do, I know that you can help me. I'm just tired, is all."

Hannibal considers this, that warm feeling spreading through him. He watches the road ahead of them, how the car's lights bounce against the rocks in the unpaved road, how occasional nocturnal eyes flash at the edges of it. He listens to Will's breathing, perfectly even and relaxed.

Finally, he decides that Will is being honest.

"How can I help you rest?" he asks, looking over just in time so that he can see the tension in Will's jaw disappear to be replaced with a sheepish smile.

"Just... stay. Wake me if you see me having a nightmare. Tell me who I am if I don't seem it."

Will's house appears at the end of the road, lit up by the headlights.

"I won't let anyone else fill your mind," Hannibal says. His throat tightens, and he bites his cheek to combat the powerful but peaceful thing breaching inside of him.

There's not quite a word for that thing, a mixture of joy and grief and surprise.

The car pulls to a stop in front of the house, secluded and quiet. The dogs all sit up, ears perked, now that the car has stopped. Will waits a few seconds before he removes the keys, taking a deep breath.

They get out of the car at the same time, letting the dogs out. They run loose for several minutes, happy to be home again. Will leads Hannibal into the house, letting the dogs do what they need to for the time being.

He sets Calypso on Will's old, dusty sofa.

"I don't usually let dogs on the furniture," Will confesses. "But she's yours, so I can make an exception."

Hannibal tries to ignore the fact that his cheeks grow hot when Will says that. He wants to argue that Calypso is *not* his, that he is *not* a dog owner, that he has never been one way or another about dogs, but it would be in vain.

Calypso is his, now.

And it's fine with him.

She looks comfortable there. Hannibal stands with his arms crossed, taking in the sight of her. The little beastie has, in the course of only a short number of days, changed a considerable amount. Peacefully resting after a long day out with Hannibal, and then at the park with Will, she is far from the fearful creature left in a cage, meant to be tortured by weak and cowardly men.

He's so lost in thought that he doesn't notice Will leave and return with the dogs. It only registers when Felicity sniffs at his hand, her nose wet and cold.

He jolts, slightly, and places the hand in the front pocket of his trousers.

Behind him, quiet, Will says, "I'm going to bed. Come on."

It only then registers in Hannibal that this entire thing has been, more or less, an invitation there. His spin stiffens at the thought.

How often has he thought of this? How often does he crave to be so close to Will?

He swallows and turns around to find Will already halfway under the covers. Hannibal sits on the bed, too.

Will's eyes pass over him. "Are you going to sleep in all that?" he asks, gesturing vaguely at the entirety of Hannibal.

He swallows again, realizing that he's still fully dressed. Three piece suit, shoes, and all else.

"No," he says, but doesn't move. He isn't exactly sure why, but he suddenly finds himself unable to move or think or speak.

And Will laughs, louder and more genuine than Hannibal thinks he's ever heard.

"Really?" he asks. "You're clamming up? The suave and impeccable Doctor Lecter, flustered at the prospect of sharing a bed with another man?"

Hannibal purses his lips. He almost says, "Not just any man, Will Graham," but bites his tongue before he does so. He doesn't want to sound...weak?

What he says isn't much better, however.

"This isn't my bed."

And Will grins, his teeth catching the moonlight riding in through the window. They look sharp. Hannibal wonders how he hadn't noticed before.

"Well, I don't exactly have satin sheets," Will returns, "but you can handle one night slumming it here with me. We've slept on your floor, after all."

Hannibal can do nothing but smile in response to that. After a moment, he sheds his outer layers until he's only in his shirt and his briefs. He's out of his own element, he supposes, and he doesn't want to infringe on anything.

It's far from anything he imagined, all the same. For some reason, he never thought he would be with Will anywhere than his own home, in his own bed, on his own terms.

He never thought Will would be the one in command.

He finds himself under Will's worn cotton sheets, on a sinking mattress, but it doesn't matter. Will is pressed against him, and Hannibal has his arms around him, and sleep comes easily.

When Will stirs from a nightmare, sweaty and twitching and making horrible little noises, Hannibal wakes him, pressing a prim and tender kiss to his forehead.

"My poor muse," he whispers, pulling him close. "What ails you? Has a nightmare brought you more strange delusions?"

The poetry is lost on the shaken, half-asleep Will. He clutches Hannibal's shirt, his own soaked with sweat.

"I played him like a violin," he mumbles, pressing his head against Hannibal's chest. "I cut open his throat and put my bow to his chords and I made him sing and I--"

Hannibal hushes him and strokes his hair, damp with perspiration. He doesn't mind.

"Will," he sighs. "Whoever this killer is, don't let him into your head."

Will shivers and lets out a groan.

"Will," repeats Hannibal. "You're with me right now. Not him."

"There's too many of them."

"There's only me, Will, and you."

Will lets out an open-mouthed exhale, which only gathers on Hannibal's chest, where his face is pressed. Will props himself up.

"I'm awake now," he says.

Hannibal pulls him close again, arms wrapped around him.

"I won't let anyone else into your beautiful mind," he promises.

Will doesn't answer.

They fall asleep and remain like that until the sun has barely begun to rise, and the sky is steel gray with the touches of morning light.

Hannibal wakes with more of an appreciation for Baudelaire's poetry than he would have imagined previously possible.

Chapter End Notes

The full poems are available in English and French, for those curious.

[L'Amour et le Crâne](#)

[La Muse malade](#)

Changement

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They both rise before the sun, heavy with the knowledge that the day must carry on as usual, but warm from the night's embrace.

Will makes coffee, toast, and eggs for breakfast. Hannibal knows that the coffee and bread both are stale, and the eggs are far from fresh, but he doesn't mind. Drinking from Will's chipped mug, eating in Will's dusty kitchen, with Will's bright eyes trained on him...

Oh, those eyes.

They look rested after their night together, and Will even admits it, saying he hasn't felt so relaxed in a while.

He shrugs and takes Hannibal's mug from him, setting it down on the counter. Having freed Hannibal's hands, he leans against his chest and chuckles.

"Guess all the pills and tea you could give me aren't much in comparison to good old-fashioned physical contact."

Hannibal takes it as an invitation to wrap himself around Will, embracing and holding in a way he was not able to the last time he did so in this kitchen.

He once again cards his fingers through Will's hair, so happy to have a smile pressed against him instead of tear-stained cheeks.

They can't linger long, however. Hannibal still has appointments with his patients, and he really can't make a habit of skipping them.

Will offers to drive him, as if there were another option. Hannibal accepts, of course.

"On one condition, however," he says, pulling on yesterday's trousers. It feels strange, letting Will see him dress, but stranger still wearing stale clothes.

Shrugging on a red and black plaid shirt, Will gives him a questioning look. "Conditions? For me to get you to work on time?"

"Naturally," Hannibal returns. He finishes tightening his belt and crosses over to button up Will's shirt, taking the moment to feel Will's bare chest against the pads of his fingertips.

"And what's that?" Will asks, watching his hands with curiosity.

"You take the rest of the day off," Hannibal answers, leaving the last button open, something he knows Will doesn't do. "Once you've taken me to Baltimore, keep driving. Find yourself a mountain stream and go fishing. Forget about Jack, about the Egalitarian, about the violinist that haunted your dreams last night."

Will's lips purse at that. "Jack won't like that."

"I sense that Jack doesn't like much of anything."

"True." Will takes Hannibal's hand in both of his own. "But I'll do it. It'll be nice to clear my head." He pauses and runs his fingertips over Hannibal's knuckles, which makes warmth ride up through his veins. "And I can take Calypso if you need, since you'll be at your office and--"

Hannibal hushes him by cupping his face with his free hand.

"I like having her there," he says. "She calms my patients."

"A page out of my book?" Will smiles. "I like it, Doctor Lecter. Dog therapy is good. More shrinks should be like you."

Hannibal recoils, only half-teasingly. "I don't enjoy it when you call me that," he says, his eyebrows knitting in distaste. "The disdain behind the word is unsettling."

"Oh." Will shrugs, a rolling motion. "You know I don't like psy--*other* psychiatrists."

Hannibal sighs, but kisses his cheek nonetheless. Will's stubble tickles his lips, a sensitive and pleasant sensation.

He steps back and sighs, realizing that they have to get moving if they're to arrive at Hannibal's office on time. Will needs to pack his fishing gear, and Hannibal--

Hannibal needs to shower and change into cleaner clothes, but that doesn't seem to be an option. He only just realizes the odor clinging to the shirt on him, which he's worn for all of twenty four hours now. It's nothing terribly foul, but stale and used all the same.

He grimaces, and Will seems to pick up on what he's feeling immediately.

"Sorry," he says, his gaze shifting to the side. "I should have given you the time to pack something." He raises a hand to finger at the collar of the offending shirt. "If it's any consolation, I don't mind it."

"It's fine," Hannibal lies. His nose is much more sensitive than Will's, and the lingering wear doesn't escape him. Part of it is Will's scent, though, a result of clinging to each other through the night, and that isn't too awful.

But he has patients, and he *never* wears anything two days in a row, even if it *does* smell like a sleeping Will, his sweat mingled with Hannibals, sparingly bare skin touching--

He shivers at the thought of it, partially inclined to bury himself back in the sheets of Will's bed. But he won't allow himself to become subject to such pathetic, romantic whims.

And he has patients!

"Perhaps you can drop me off at my house, and I'll get a fresh change of clothes," he suggests with a sigh.

"You'll be late," Will reminds him, and pauses.

A curious expression passes over his face, blue eyes lit like ice before sun, and he goes to begin digging around in his closet. Hannibal watches with a frown. Will has good shirts, of course--

Hannibal made sure of that. But Will is considerably more slight than Hannibal, and--

"Ah!" Will exclaims. "This could work."

He turns around with a green flannel and a green sweater, both of which would look somewhat oversized on Will.

"You want me to wear those?" Hannibal inquires, staring at the garments. He's never seen Will wear them before; he remembers every outfit the man has ever worn, thanks to his close scrutiny and excellent memory. "To work?" he adds, making it clear that any disdain is not towards Will's offer innately, but rather for the situation that it might result in.

"They're not too casual," Will answers, his lips curving into a frown. "And besides. You get a kick out of making me dress up. Why don't you dress down for me?"

The words go straight to his gut, warming him. A smirk, a grin (he can't tell the difference anymore) punctures his features. He moves so he can stand before Will and allow his fingers to ghost across Will's cheekbones.

"For you, Will?" he purrs, tracing his hairline and then retreating, folding his hands behind his back--the picture of innocence.

Will's cheeks go pink, the way that Hannibal loves. It makes him look so delicate--petals on the sand.

Hannibal takes the garments from him. "Pack for your fishing excursion," he says, letting the moment pass. "I'll use your shower, if that's alright."

Swallowing, Will nods. "Sure."

It's impossible to tell if he's upset or simply stirred, just as Hannibal is.

Will's shampoo is watered down castille soap. It's not watered down enough, however, and it burns Hannibal's sensitive scalp. The commercial bar of soap isn't so harsh on the rest of his skin, however, and he almost thinks he would have been better off using that for his hair.

There's no conditioner to be spoken of, which does explain Will's split-end situation. He had hoped that Will wasn't fool to the suggestion that it was exclusively a women's item, but it must not be so.

As Hannibal dries himself off with a clean towel that smells very strongly of Will's natural scent, he decides he'll have to put together another gift basket for Will. He wants him to be properly groomed, after all.

He uses Will's razor and shaving cream because even if he *is* wearing Will's clothes, he doesn't want to adopt his entire look.

With satisfaction, he sees that Will's only aftershave is the one Hannibal gave him, and he puts some on himself. It's the only quality item in the bathroom (the bath oils nowhere to be found; Hannibal wonders if Will ever used them).

He dresses in Will's clothes, which are soft and barely worn. They smell like they've been deep in Will's closet for some time, and Hannibal wonders why he has them in the first place.

Will answers that question without Hannibal having to ask it.

Throughout the entire car ride to Baltimore, Will continues to glance covertly at Hannibal. Each time he does, he smirks slightly, and his cheeks fill with color.

When they're in the city again and Hannibal finally catches his eye as he does it, Will looks flustered. His smile goes wide and his eyes even brighter, and he glances down at his lap with pursed lips while they wait at a stop light.

"I might have gotten those with you in mind a few weeks back," he confesses.

Pleasure spills in Hannibal's chest. He doesn't particularly like the clothes themselves, but he likes that Will enjoys the way they look on him.

"Tell me why," he says, fiddling at the plaid collar sticking from the sweater in a motion that mimics one of Will's own nervous ticks.

The light goes green and Will's foot is back on the gas pedal, trying to suppress his smile.

"At the time, a small act of vengeance," he confesses with a quick glance. "It was when you had me get fitted for a suit. I picked those out of spite, without thinking you'd ever actually wear them."

The tone of his voice and look on his face says that he is quite pleased that Hannibal did.

Hannibal is, too.

Not long after, they arrive at his office.

No one is there yet, luckily--not that it would matter. The entire original premise of their relationship, after all, was for it to be public.

But Hannibal almost wants to keep this secret between them. This is what's real between them, this is theirs and theirs alone. He has always been private, after all, and Will has, too.

And despite the fact that no one is there to see, despite the fact that that Hannibal truly wants to, he doesn't press a goodbye kiss to Will's lips.

Instead, he puts Calypso in her travel bag. As he gets out, he smiles fondly at him.

"Enjoy yourself today, Will." He finds himself leaning on the car. "The only thing I want you to worry about is catching a fish for us to serve to Gaul tomorrow night."

Probably not the right thing to say, because Will frowns at the mention of Gaul.

"Just focus on the fish," Hannibal amends.

Will nods and pats the passenger seat, welcoming one of the dogs in the back to take up the space that Hannibal filled. Winston is the one to do so, and Hannibal closes the door.

He watches for a moment as he drives away, and then hurries into his office before his first patient comes.

He sees Franklyn again for the first time since the opera. The man makes a few clumsy remarks regarding Hannibal's clothes during the session, and about Calypso, but Hannibal redirects the conversation back to him.

"You were telling me about Tobias," he reminds him.

"Right." Franklyn eyes Calypso nervously, even though the creature has no vicious qualities about her. He swallows, and says, "He's been saying strange things lately."

"Strange?" Hannibal inquires. "How so?"

"Troubling things," Franklyn replies. "For example..." He trails off and shakes his head. "I don't know if I want to tell you."

Hannibal finds he doesn't care either way, but he is obligated to remind his patient that he can tell him anything, as long as he is comfortable with divulging it.

Sighing, Franklyn nods, and he meets Hannibal's eyes, his gaze only temporarily fixating on the flannel collar of Will's shirt.

"Last week, a few days before... before I saw it on TattleCrime... Tobias said he wanted to use someone as an instrument."

And Hannibal's interest is piqued immediately. He leans forward.

"An *actual* instrument," Franklyn clarifies. "He said... he said he wanted to cut open someone's throat and play their vocal chords like a violin. And then, a few days later... I saw the TattleCrime article."

"That is disconcerting, Franklyn," Hannibal replies. He remembers Will's nightmare, the way he babbled and shook because of it. The way that Hannibal had to hush him, to remind him that he was *Will* and no one else, to assure him that he had nothing to fear.

He already disliked Tobias. Now, Hannibal loathes him for taking up precious space in Will's head.

Anyone who distresses his muse is a creature to be abhorred and punished, he decides.

"Have you considered going to the police?" he adds. It's an obligatory comment; he's only playing the part of the 'good' psychiatrist.

Franklyn's lip begins to quiver. "N-no," he says. "Tobias is my friend. I can't--he *wouldn't* do that."

Hannibal closes his eyes for a moment. "Well, Franklyn," he says. "I am bound by confidentiality. If you are concerned that Tobias killed someone, it's up to you to report him."

And he wants him to. He wants Tobias gone and behind bars so there is one less menial killer for Will to have to *deal* with.

Franklyn nods, looking afraid, and Hannibal supposes that he could just take the matter into his own hands.

At the end of their session, Franklyn keeps his gaze downcast and doesn't try to linger longer than his hour. He scurries out the door to leave.

Hannibal wonders if it has anything to do with Will, but decides that he doesn't particularly care.

When he's done for the day and has begun to close up his office, Hannibal's stomach is growling from a missed lunch and his meager breakfast at Will's house.

He's ready to get into his car and drive home for something to eat, but he quickly remembers that Will dropped him off and that his car is still parked at his home, several miles away.

He was busy focusing on other things to realize the fault in their plan earlier, he supposes.

Before he can formulate a new one, however, he hears someone enter his waiting room. Picking up Calypso in her bag, he goes to see who waits behind the fogged glass door. He expects it to be Will back early from his fishing break, but he's surprised to find Jack Crawford standing there instead.

A look of either anger or concern is on his face, and Hannibal braces himself for an unpleasant encounter.

"Jack," he says. "How can I help you?"

The agent's eyes first fall on Hannibal's clothes. He looks as if he's about to question them, their resemblance to Will's wardrobe, but then he notices Hannibal's bag, which is squirming thanks to Calypso. She's restless from a day spent in the office, and she lets out a small yelp as she pokes her head out at him.

He blinks, looking for a moment like he's just seen a mermaid on dry land. Then, he shakes his head, likely deciding to ask questions about it all later.

"I'm looking for Will," he says. "He hasn't been answering his calls, and I thought you might know where he is."

Hannibal nods. "Is something the matter?"

Jack purses his lips. He looks like he's about to say something, but then reconsiders and takes a deep breath.

"The matter is that I have a handful of serial killers on the loose, and Will Graham is off the radar." He takes another breath. "Now," he says. "Do you know where he is?"

"He's out fishing," Hannibal says, matter-of-factly.

"He's. Fishing."

"On my recommendation, of course," he adds. "I thought he could use a day to relax from everything."

Jack folds his arms over his chest, and to his credit, he does look as though he's doing his best to be patient.

"What did I say to you about keeping Will focused, Doctor Lecter?"

"You said that he wouldn't be of use to you if he was too busy caught up in an affair," Hannibal quotes, remembering their phone conversation from the week before. "Fishing is not an affair."

Jack scowls, dark and heavy and disapproving. Hannibal finds himself, once again, considering what sort of unpleasant gift he should leave for the man; Jack's clear lack of regard for Will's well being is inexcusable.

"Regardless, he's not much use to me if I can't access him," Jack insists. "I need Will sharp, ready, and on the job."

Hannibal sighs and lifts Calypso out of her bag to try and settle her continual squirming. Holding her to his chest, he says, "You'll find that he's sharp and ready if you give him a break from time to time. His psyche can't handle dealing with so many murderers at once, after all."

Jack pauses at that, and the scowl becomes neutral. Hannibal wonders if he can acknowledge the role he's played in all this; Will could still be Jack's malleable tool had he not stepped in and made himself a matchmaker.

"You're right," he says, grudgingly, shaking his head. "I was just worried. He wasn't answering my calls, and I panicked. I didn't mean to get upset with you." He clenches his jaw and looks around the room, unsure of what to do next.

It's the closest thing to an apology Hannibal thinks he'll ever get from Jack Crawford.

"I'm sure Will is fine," he answers. "Simply out of cell reception." He tilts his head and smiles, assuring and forgiving--though he feels neither of those things.

Jack nods. "Right." He looks at Hannibal again with that curious expression, from the dog to the casual attire. Idly, he huffs, "Will's really rubbing of on you, then."

Hannibal purses his lips, doubting he can pass any of this off as just part of the act. Instead, he decides to change the subject.

"The ballet is coming up soon," he says. "Has Will shared his recent theories with you regarding the Egalitarian?"

"I haven't heard from him in over twenty four hours," Jack returns, the beginnings of a scowl forming on his face. "Did he confer with you?"

"Indeed," he says. "Will thinks the Egalitarian's final kill will be the night of the ballet. And since he's killing for a lover or something of the like--"

Jack cuts him off, understanding dawning in his eyes.

"The last victim will be that lover." He grits his jaw for a moment. "Damn. Well, that can help us narrow down our suspects."

Hannibal tilts his head to that. "Suspects?" he inquires. "May I ask who?"

Jack's scowl blooms once again, an ugly thing. "Another time. I should really get going. There's a serial killer to catch, after all." He looks at Calypso one last time, and he smiles bitterly.

"You have plans for Will this weekend, am I correct?"

"You are."

"Make sure he's working. Can't let him relax too much."

Hannibal gives him a polite smile and lets him walk out the door. He's left to brood for a moment, realizing that Jack no longer thinks he's benefitting from Hannibal's "faux" relationship with Will.

Good.

Because he isn't.

Hannibal, without a car to get himself home, ends up caving in and calling Bedelia.

A favor for a friend, he tells her, because he doesn't want her tearing into him about his relationship with Will Graham.

It's foolish to assume she won't, however, especially given the day's attire.

She arrives in front of his office in her white Audi, and when she sees him, her eyebrows shoot up high.

"A *dog?*" she exclaims, laughter peeling from her lips. She quickly raises a hand to cover her mouth, a lackluster attempt to retain her elegance, but the damage has been done.

"Yes," he says, keeping his tone curt. He enters the vehicle, keeping Calypso in his lap. The puppy squirms there, and he knows he'll have to let her run loose in the yard when they return home. It's a wonder how she's bloomed in the right environment.

Much like Will, he supposes. Or hopes, rather. Will hasn't quite emerged from his husk yet.

Bedelia doesn't say anything until they're on the main street, and then she clears her throat.

"It would appear I have missed out on several major developments," she announces. Glancing him over, she gives him a sly smile. "Was all this too woo him, or did that come later?"

Hannibal scowls, and Calypso tries to wriggle out of his lap and onto the floor of the vehicle.

"Calypso came before, but it was *not* to win him over," he replies, his tone firm. He feels like a teenager quite suddenly: vulnerable, defensive, and *needing a ride home*.

"And the clothes?" she hums.

Hannibal only feels self-conscious for a moment, but is grounded when he remembers that this is what Will wanted.

Staking his claim, he thinks. Hopes.

"He invited me to spend the night with him," he says. With a self-satisfied smile, he adds, "I believe he may have intentionally not given me the opportunity to pack an overnight bag so I would wear them."

"Hm." Bedelia purses her lips, obviously amused. "Devious."

With a huff, Hannibal replies, "Would you expect anything less?"

Bedelia's fingers tap the steering wheel absently as they pause at a red light. "I suppose not," she concedes. "Has he lived up to your expectations, then, Hannibal?"

"What do you think?" he returns. The clothes, the dog (who has given up on her wriggling), the lack of a vehicle--it's all because of Will, the only person who has proven better than what he could imagine.

"You seem to think so," she says. Her eyebrows are raised, slightly, skeptical.

"You don't trust my judgment."

"No, Hannibal. Your judgment is better than most people I've met. I only mean to say that you've changed since we spoke last," she says, her tone controlled. "Less *lovesick*, I should think. His reciprocation--and I believe I am correct in labelling that, yes?--has mellowed you. You no longer believe that love is a disease."

He stills in recollection of their last conversation, and the fear that he had felt then washes over him, stale and no longer applicable. He was so worried that Will would change him, make him act unlike himself, make him dependent.

And even though he understands that those fears have been realized, he is unbothered.

"If it truly is a disease," he says, "then I have succumbed fully, and there is no turning back."

Bedelia smiles wryly. "Then let's hope that Will is a sufficient medicine for you, Hannibal."

Turning his gaze towards the window, he smiles to himself and strokes Calypso's spine. She is, perhaps, the most tangible evidence of his condition. How much he has changed, how much he has let go of.

He is eager to see what manifests from Will's own transformation.

Having gleaned the information she wanted, Bedelia does not bother him for the rest of the ride, and they sit in comfortable silence.

When they arrive at Hannibal's house, he thanks her, exiting the vehicle quickly, and retreats inside the walls of his own home. He just wants to have dinner, drink some wine, and let Calypso get some of her newfound energy out.

He will spend his evening relaxing like a grown, refined man, because he is *nothing* like a teenager.

Except for the fact that he finds himself unwilling to take off Will's sweater. It smells like him. It's pleasant, and he wears it to bed.

And he pines all night long, unable to wait for when Will comes back with his fresh catch.

I haven't written anything ahead of this chapter, which is why I waited so long to post this. I need some inspiration; my mind has been with other stories.

Crainte

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next morning, the morning of their dinner with the Egalitarian, Hannibal is woken by a phone call from Will.

It's still the wee hours; he knows because he hasn't been asleep for long. He knows it's Will because he set the ringtone for him as Chopin's *Étude in A-Flat Major*.

(It's been set as that since he had a dream wherein Will was a shepherd boy and sacrificed his lambs to Hannibal, but he won't tell Will that.)

Still, the timing of the call alarms him, and he quickly takes his cellphone from its place on his bedside table to answer.

"Will?" It comes from his mouth as a gasp. "Tell me you're alright."

And while the breathing on the other end of the line is perfectly steady, it does little to soothe Hannibal's concerns.

"Oh. Hey," Will replies. "I'm fine. I just realized how late it is. Or, early, I guess. Sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Hannibal assures him immediately. "You are always welcome to call me. Is something the matter?"

"I'm fine," he says, chuckling. "Just thought I should call you, since I just got home. I have a dozen voicemails from Jack."

Hannibal thinks there's a silent question there. *Were you worried, too?*

It's sweet, heartwarming, that Will would think to let him know that he got home safely.

"Have you answered Jack?" he says, instead of voicing his thoughts. "He did come hounding after me, you know."

"Figured as much."

"Did you catch any fish?" Hannibal supposes it's better to avoid the topic of Jack Crawford for now.

"Six good-sized brook trout," Will answers, pride swelling in his voice (so much so that Hannibal might keen). "Hoping to catch a big fish at dinner, though."

And there it is. Jeremy Gaul is the catch of the month, he reckons.

"For Jack, or for yourself?" Hannibal wonders.

"We'll see. And I'll see you tomorrow. Sorry for waking you."

Will hangs up before Hannibal can tell him that he's free to wake him any time he wants.

Will arrives at Hannibal's house an hour before their dinner is meant to start. There is little to do, as Hannibal has already prepared most of the food; he's been waiting on Will's trout.

Still, the table needs to be set, and they do it together. They don't discuss much, besides Will apologizing once more for his late phone call.

"I got a little lost on the way home," he says, and that's all there is to it.

Hannibal doesn't question it, instead letting Will gut three of the fish (beautifully colored; green with yellow spots and a stunning red underbelly) while he mixes together breadcrumbs and chopped pecans.

They coat the fish in the mixture, then sear it in peanut oil. After that's done and they transfer that to the oven to bake, the doorbell rings.

Will offers to answer. Hannibal is left to browning the butter, but he listens closely. Gaul's surprised exclamation upon entering needles Hannibal.

"Hannibal didn't tell me his darling would be joining us," he says, practically cooing. "What's your name?"

Even from the kitchen, Hannibal can hear how belittling Gaul's tone is, like Will is nothing but a plaything--something to be observed and admired but not taken seriously.

"Will." The answer is patient, controlled. Like he's used to it. The notion infuriates Hannibal.

"Will," Gaul repeats, heavily. "A powerful word, both noun and verb. Tell me, Will--which meaning pertains to you? Strong, or affecting a desire upon?"

They enter the kitchen before Will answers, and Hannibal looks over his shoulder to regard them.

Meeting Hannibal's eye, Will says, "Why can't I be both?"

Gaul chuckles at that, a dark sound. He's obviously already determined his own thoughts on the matter.

Hannibal turns back to his work quickly, pouring fresh-squeezed lemon juice into the now-foaming butter. He stirs at it attentively for a few moments before turning to regard his guest.

"Welcome, Jeremy."

"Hannibal," he returns coolly, tilting his head. "Thank you for having me."

Will glances between the two of them, gleaned something from the interaction. He smiles reaches for the wine decanter left on the counter and pours glasses for Gaul and himself.

"Watching Hannibal cook is half the experience," he tells Gaul, his eyes glittering. "Make yourself comfortable."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow at the authority with which Will says that, but he's not upset by it. Will's confidence stirs satisfaction in him, and he resumes tending to the butter, careful not to let it overheat.

"And what is the meal tonight?" inquires Gaul, settling at the counter, next to Will. He sounds amused, as if Will is only playing at power.

Bristling slightly, undeniably possessive, Hannibal ignores how close Gaul is to his muse. Will is perfectly in control of his side of the situation, and Hannibal has to respect that, lest he confirm Gaul's ugly opinion of Will's stance.

Will is not just an object of his desire, and Will is perfectly capable without him.

Quickly, Hannibal adds the remaining pecans and the parsley. He removes it from heat so that he can take the fish out of the oven. The plates are next, fresh out of the warming oven, and he places two halves of trout onto each plate. He then pours the browned butter over the fish, a glistening garnish.

"Brook trout," he says, to finally answer Gaul's question, "in a pecan breading, topped with lemon and parsley brown butter." He lets his gaze fall onto Will with what he knows can only be seen as admiration. "The fish, of course, is Will's own catch."

Will glows under the praise, and Gaul doesn't miss it.

"To the dining room?" Will asks, already headed in its direction, carrying his glass of wine and the one that Hannibal abandoned much earlier. He follows after with the plates and sets them at the table.

Gaul takes the head of the table without invitation, which irks Hannibal, despite it meaning that he *does* get to sit across from Will.

And to further assault Hannibal's sense of social graces, Gaul begins eating before Hannibal can take a seat. The man is too much like livestock for him to even resist thinking about eating, with his senseless lack of manners.

But Hannibal knows that he can't eat Gaul, because Jack will want him arrested for his crimes as the Egalitarian. He takes a seat, graceful as ever, and Will meets him with dancing eyes, reading his irritation and addressing it with amusement.

"Truly lovely, Hannibal," Gaul says through a mouthful. "Both your cooking and your darling here. Tell me, where did you pick him up?"

Hannibal takes a bite of his own trout. Chewing, he retains his eye contact with Will, both to relish it and to prompt him.

"A mutual friend of ours set us up, actually," Will replies. He takes a sip of the wine, a *Garnacha rosé* that Hannibal chose to pair with both the trout and the upcoming farro salad.

"He was likely tired of watching me pine after him," Hannibal sighs. The truth, sometimes, is the best thing to provide. "All the same, it took some time to win him over."

Gaul laughs, a snide sound. "I somehow doubt you'd have trouble winning anyone over, Hannibal."

"Do you?" Will queries, eyebrows raised, the picture of poise. He's playing a part, and playing it well, but Hannibal has yet to determine to what end.

"Of course," Gaul returns, taking another greedy bite of food. "Hannibal's rich, entitled, handsome. You're nothing more than a blue-collared boy with a pretty face."

He says it lightly, but Hannibal takes it as an insult. On the other hand, Will's mouth twitches into a smirk.

This is work for Will, Hannibal reminds himself. To him, Gaul already discussing class is as good as an outright confession.

"Do you find that playing out in your own love life, Mister Gaul?" he asks. Most of his fish is gone, though he's neglected the breadding and the butter sauce.

Gaul has just finished his last bite, the plate entirely clean. "Please," he laughs. "I'm hardly so desirable as Hannibal. My own lovers are hardly as rapt and ready." He keeps his eyes glued to him as he says it, barely giving Will any note.

Hannibal, perhaps in his ire and distaste for the man, forgoes all sense of subtlety.

"And how is Callum, Jeremy?"

Gaul visibly stiffens as he says it. "My apprentice?" he laughs. "Working as hard as ever." His hands fiddle on the table without any more food to scarf down. "He's catering tonight, as usual. Not that I would have brought him here!" It ends on a controlled but still defensive note.

Will takes notice of this, clearly just as sold as Hannibal is on the "apprentice" bit. They both know that Gaul sees the boy as much more; who else would his muse be?

"Shall I bring out the next course?" Hannibal cuts in.

"Yes please," Gaul answers, reaching hastily for his glass of wine.

Hannibal rises, nodding at Will, and returns to the kitchen. The farro is resting covered on the counter, but first Hannibal removes the radicchio from the vegetable crisper. He takes the largest leaves and sets one of each on cold plates, a bed for the salad.

The farro has been cooked like a risotto (with carrots, onions, celery, and garlic), and tossed with the dressing Hannibal prepared (olive oil, lemon juice, and fresh diced parsley and marjoram) as well as fried cauliflower and his homemade prosciutto.

He spoons the salad onto the radicchio leaves, fusses with the presentation for a few moments, and then drizzles the remainder of the dressing over it all before he carries the plates back into the dining room, where Will has been skillfully interrogating the Egalitarian.

Despite the fact that Gaul clearly doesn't think Will is worth his time, the look in Will's eyes says he's gathered all the information he needs.

Gaul practically moans upon seeing Hannibal. "What is this beautiful dish?" he asks, quick to find an excuse to turn his attentions to Hannibal again.

"Just what it looks like," he answers, setting a plate in front of Gaul. "Farro salad with prosciutto and fried cauliflower."

Will takes his plate with a cocked eyebrow and a sly smile. "The pig is your own, I presume," he murmurs.

Hannibal takes a seat and watches as Gaul takes a bite of the prosciutto first. "I slaughtered her myself, yes," he answers. "Some time ago, I'm afraid, but prosciutto *is* a cured meat. You'll find it most enjoyable."

Will raises a forkful of meat and grain to his lips, knowing and pleased. "I wish you would serve me pork more often, Hannibal," he sighs, and takes a bite.

Pleasure washes over his face once he does, and it causes a stirring in Hannibal's gut.

"I don't see why you wouldn't," Gaul answers, now trying the cauliflower. "This is delicious."

Hannibal keeps his eyes on Will, still savoring the food. "I should, though I was concerned it wasn't fully to your taste," he tells him. "Seeing your enjoyment is tantamount to experiencing it myself."

Will smiles at him, and his face turns a shade darker. Hannibal smiles, too, and begins eating his own food.

"Then perhaps this is where I remind you of my purpose here, before things get too hot," Gaul huffs, breaking any developing mood with his mere presence; the words were not necessary. "You do, of course, intend to have Will as part of our discussion?"

Setting down his fork with a thinly-veiled scowl, Will interjects. "What discussion?"

"Jeremy is here to discuss making something customized for you, Will," Hannibal explains. "I would like to hear your insights."

Though he doesn't want Gaul to be the one to craft it, he does want to know what Will might desire in such a gift.

"I make the finest jewelry in the state," Gaul adds, addressing Will. "My tastes are value in themselves. Not many people have the fortune of choosing what they want from me."

"Oh?" Will doesn't sound impressed.

"Yes," Gaul says, his brows furrowing. "You should be grateful that Hannibal is doing this for you. It's rare that someone like you gets the attentions of--"

"Enough," Hannibal interrupts him, his tone firm. "*I* am lucky to have *Will's* attentions, and it's become clear to me that your designs are not what is necessary to make that clear."

He makes sure that Gaul doesn't miss the anger in his gaze.

Will sits quietly in his seat, focusing on his glass and swirling its remaining contents. Gaul simmers for a moment, before clearing his throat, finally having decided upon a retort.

"And it's become clear to *me* that I am not welcome here," he spits. He moves his chair back with a grating noise before standing, and then picks up the plate of salad.

"But this is still delicious," he growls, immediately making his way to exit, stalking away on short and spindly legs.

Hannibal watches in amused silence as the Egalitarian steals his plate, and Will begins laughing once they both hear the front door slam.

"Then it's agreed," Hannibal says, his body loosening considerably, "that Jeremy Gaul is a joke."

Will nods and presses his lips together. "He's horrible. Ridiculous, but horrible."

"I hope his presence hasn't spoiled your appetite," Hannibal says. "You haven't eaten enough in the past few days."

"I'm fine," Will replies. He rolls his eyes, but takes a large bite of the salad nonetheless. "And I stand by what I said. You shouldn't be afraid of feeding me pig."

"I hadn't expected *that* to be what it takes to get you to eat," Hannibal muses. He tries the salad for himself; he prefers it to the fish, certainly, which had been too rich when paired with the insolence of the company.

Will smiles through another mouthful. "I consider it part of my lessons."

"And what did you learn tonight, my dear Will?" Hannibal inquires, drinking in the fact that they're alone again. "Not from me, but from the Egalitarian."

"That's the thing." Will sets down his fork, and it glints in the low light. "Jeremy Gaul isn't."

Hannibal blinks. "Isn't?"

"He isn't the Egalitarian, Hannibal," Will tells him. He looks grave as he does so.

"No." Hannibal shakes his head, feels something begin prickling at his skin. "Will, you've made a mistake. Gaul is the man you're after."

Will rolls his eyes. "Stubborn, are we?"

"Yes," Hannibal insists. "Jeremy Gaul killed Georgia Stanton. I was there. He's the Egalitarian."

Folding his arms across his chest, Will sighs. "Did you see him, Hannibal?"

"No, I *smelled* him, Will. Silver and silk, that fine Japanese cologne he's worn for the past fifteen years that still fails to suit him." He frowns and notices Will's closed-off posture. "Don't you trust me, Will?"

"I do," he clips, "but no one's been arrested because of your sensitive nose before. They have been arrested because of my profiling, though."

The looseness Hannibal had acquired in Gaul's absence quickly turns to tension as he finds himself stiffening in defense. Will is the last person he'd anticipate this argument from.

"And your profiling skills are tremendous," he agrees, "but I know what I sensed in that house. It was him, without a doubt."

"And I know what I saw in him, Hannibal, and he's *not* the one killing people off in pairs. One of us has to be wrong."

Hannibal sniffs. "Is this our first disagreement?"

"Yes." Will uncrosses his arms and sighs. "But we *can* be rational about it. We're not going to fight."

"We're not," he confirms, taking a deep breath. "What makes you so certain, then, that it isn't Gaul?"

"It's the way he talked about class," Will answers, clearly relieved for the agreement. "He spoke with disdain for my status, like I wasn't *worthy* of you. He's not the same man who seeks to bring people together despite that."

"Then how do we explain the smell?" he presses, the pricking at his skin turning to a crawl, heading up his wrists and ankles, aimed towards his core. "I have never known anyone else to wear that cologne, Will. I know what I--"

"I know," Will says, and his face is kind. Grounding. He lets Hannibal look into his eyes, which are swimming with thought. "I know what I sensed, too, so we have to use both of those."

Hannibal closes his eyes and nods, trying to soothe himself. "Yes." A pause to breathe. "Yes, go on."

"Is there anyone else that could share his scent?"

"No one shares scents, Will. There are nuances that separate everyone."

"Okay, but indulge me. Say two people's odors could meld together."

Hannibal thinks of Will's scent, the way it clung to his sweater when he slept the night before. How his own presence has begun to change it.

"It's possible," he concedes, pursing his lips together. "Callum, Gaul's apprentice and likely-unwilling lover--his scent seemed indistinguishable when they were together."

The crawling has ceased, and he now identifies it as dread. He's so rarely encountered it in life that he couldn't recognize it in the moment.

He was dreading that he and Will might argue.

"But apart," he adds, "it would be impossible to mistake one for the other."

Will nods. "Okay, but maybe you smelled Gaul on him that night. Maybe it was the smell you recognized, and you clung to it."

Hannibal feels a bite when Will says it, suggests that he might have fallen victim to his own assumptions, but he knows it's not meant to be rude.

"Unlikely, but perhaps."

"Then Callum *could be* the Egalitarian."

The satisfaction on Will's face is evident, a smile perched on his lips with dilated pupils.

It strikes Hannibal, then, how he hasn't yet *properly* kissed him.

He decides it can wait until after dinner. Will does need to eat, after all.

Chapter End Notes

ringtone for will (the song is nicknamed as 'Shepherd Boy' by some)

[butter pecan trout](#)

[definitely not people salad](#)

Luxure

Chapter Summary

Alternative chapter title: Des Fraises

Or: Hannibal has a food kink and literally no one is surprised by that

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hannibal is grateful that Gaul didn't stay for dessert.

He hadn't prepared any beforehand, regardless, but now that he and Will have finished eating and discussing the case, he's craving something sweet.

Will follows him into the kitchen for clean-up. He rolls up his sleeves and has already begun filling up the sink with hot water when Hannibal places his hand on the small of his back.

He stands beside him, keeping his distance so as to not overstep any boundaries.

"Coffee?" he asks.

Will is still but not stiff, and his breathing has remained steady. The water is still running hot. He turns his head to look at him, his expression both amused and incredulous.

"I have issues with sleeping, and you're asking if I want caffeine? At night?"

Hannibal removes the hand but takes a step closer so that Will might feel his breath on his skin. "I had thought it would be useful for the ride home," he answers, watching the way Will's gaze flicks over to him. "But, if you would prefer to stay the night..."

Will turns the water off and begins washing the dishes, scrubbing with sponge and soap. "No coffee," he says.

"Then I'll prepare something else," Hannibal decides, stepping away again. "You're fine with doing the dishes alone for now?"

Scoffing, Will says, "Of course I am. It's the least I can do, Hannibal."

"I wouldn't want to over work my guest," he says, crossing to the refrigerator, where he has some fresh strawberries from his trip earlier in the day. He was planning to save them for breakfast, but they will be of good use now, too.

"You?" Will repeats, the humor in his voice painfully dry. "You're not the one overworking me, Hannibal."

Hannibal removes the strawberries and sets them on the kitchen island before returning to fetch the cream. "Let's not discuss Jack Crawford now, Will," he replies, already feeling heavy at the thought. "We can save him for another time."

He has other plans for now, plans that he doesn't think Jack would approve of in the slightest.

(But they're not even that devious, he tells himself.)

"No need to ask me twice, Hannibal."

For a few moments, there's nothing but the sound of water sloshing as Will continues to clean. Hannibal reaches into the back of one of his cabinets for powdered sugar (he really doesn't bake that often) and sets it with the rest of the ingredients.

When Will pauses to look over his shoulder, he smiles curiously. "Strawberries and cream?"

"If you'd like it," Hannibal answers, already on his way to get a bowl for the cream. He selects a small one with clear glass.

"I'd love anything you make me," Will says, turning back to his work.

"Noted," Hannibal murmurs, a grin already spreading across his features.

He whips the powdered sugar into the cream quickly. It's ready in a few minutes, and while Hannibal is a patient man, he doesn't want to wait for Will to be done with the dishes until they enjoy this impromptu dessert.

He plucks one of the smaller strawberries from the bowl. It's delightfully red and ripe to perfection, and Hannibal dips it into the bowl of cream without any further preparation. He then moves back to his place behind Will, placing his free hand on his hip and pressing himself to the other man's back.

He brings the strawberry to Will's mouth, eliciting a surprised sound from the back of his throat.

"That was quick," he remarks, his hand still gripping the sponge. He's been taken by surprise, clearly.

"An easy dish," Hannibal answers. His chin is now hooked over Will's shoulder, his nose pressed close to his neck. "Try it?"

Will complies by taking the entire strawberry, his lips brushing Hannibal's fingers as he does so.

It feels almost electric, shameful as Hannibal is to admit it. Touches aren't electric for him; that's something reserved for bad poetry.

Or so he thought.

"You're not supposed to eat the leaves, you know," he whispers fondly. A broad smile has taken over his expression, and he's completely occupied by the way

Will swallows, and Hannibal is close enough to hear the motion. "Wouldn't want to waste anything," he answers, his voice sounding quite dry.

"It's not a waste."

Will clears his throat and nods abruptly. "Are you going to plate the rest and make them look obnoxiously fancy?" he asks, too tense to sound as teasing as he likely intended to. "Because I do have to finish washing your dishes."

"You don't have to," Hannibal tells him, lowering his voice. "I'd much rather feed you these strawberries and leave the dishes for later." *Preferably much later*, he thinks, imagining that they'd make better use of the night and leave them until morning. He doesn't know if he's in any place to say that, though.

To his delight, however, the initial suggestion seems to do something to Will.

"Would you?" he asks, his voice cracking. The sponge in his hand drops into the soapy water.

"Mm," Hannibal confirms, and nuzzles against the exposed skin just above Will's collar. "If you'll let me."

Will takes a sharp inhale. "Oh," he says, as if he can't think of anything else. After a few more moments of Hannibal's touch, he adds, "I think I would."

"All right, then." Hannibal steps back to the island and begins slicing off the tops of the rest of the strawberries, watching as Will hastily rinses and dries his hands.

Pupils full and dark, he hurries to join Hannibal. "I'll, ah... I can... feed you, too," he says, and his cheeks are already flushed red in the dim light. He shoves his hands into his pockets out of reflex, shifts from foot to foot.

"If you like," Hannibal replies, the mirror opposite of Will. While he's completely sure of himself, he's not sure if Will is terribly nervous or comically aroused. He almost wants to tease Will about 'clamming up' the same way that Will had done to him in Wolf Trap, but thinks better of it.

He scores the top of another strawberry and dips it into the cream so that it's entirely covered; even the tips of his fingers are submerged. Will's eyes don't leave the sight.

"Are you sure you're comfortable?" Hannibal queries, taking the berry from the bowl. "If you find this strange or unwarranted--"

"No," Will says, cutting him off. He smiles and shakes his head. "It's romantic."

"Are you comfortable with romantic?" Hannibal asks. "We never exactly clarified--"

"Feed me the damn strawberry, Hannibal," Will groans, taking a decided step towards him. "I'm overthinking things, but you're being outright ridiculous."

Warmth, a familiar sensation now, fills his belly. He cups Will's cheek with his free hand and brings the berry to his lips with the other.

"Romantic it is, then," he chuckles.

Will takes it from him, closing his eyes as he does so. Hannibal takes his face with both hands and takes in every detail of it. The sight of Will eating, of him being nourished, is already wonderful enough, but this?

This is heady, intoxicating. Warmth is spreading all over his body, arousal already beginning to stir him.

Will swallows and opens his eyes. He smirks and takes in Hannibal's expression in turn.

"I knew you had a food kink," he says, satisfaction once again overpowering his features.

Hannibal only huffs in agreement before he leans in to kiss the smirk off of Will's face.

He's been close to Will in the past week, touched him and slept next to him and pressed kisses to his face, his neck, but this is different.

Better.

He'd begun to worry that they wouldn't kiss again after that first night, that there would be no passion without the thrill of confession and revelation.

There is passion here, but it's not the same as their first. They kiss slowly, and Hannibal strokes at the base of Will's neck and grips at his waist. Will has one hand on his chest, clutching Hannibal's tie, and he runs his other hand along Hannibal's back.

He seems to be tracing some sort of pattern there, but Hannibal can't take too much notice. He relishes in the touch, tasting the sweet on Will's lips.

And then he pulls away to get another strawberry, taking his time in doing so. He takes pleasure in the way that Will's body chases after his, leaning against him.

He feeds Will another strawberry and kisses him again before he's even finished chewing. Gentle but insistent, he slides his tongue against Will's bottom lip until he's allowed to taste the fruit still in Will's mouth.

And Will moans with the way that Hannibal investigates and tastes. It's a beautiful sound, and Hannibal breaks away again with a sigh.

"I don't think there's any way we'll get through all the berries," he confesses, not at all upset by the fact.

"No," Will agrees, but reaches into the bowl anyway.

Hannibal watches with more intrigue than what is likely called for as Will's fingers dip into the cream. When he brings them to Hannibal's lips, he's more focused on Will's hands than what they bear.

He takes them into his mouth, closes his lips so that he can lick away the cream. It tastes sweet, of course, but Will's skin is salty and clean beneath it, and that is the taste he delights in.

He swallows down the cream and sucks at Will's fingers, memorizing the taste of his skin, hoping to taste more of him later.

And for the first time, he doesn't mean that in a cannibalistic way.

Will pulls his fingers away and his hand comes to rest on Hannibal's neck, and he traces his thumb over the pulse point. The awe in his eyes is as palpable as what Hannibal feels in himself, and he

realizes this is as close as he will ever come to understanding Will's empathy.

It's frightening, to feel something in himself and see it mirrored back at him.

He should think it normal, to reciprocate a partner's arousal, but this is new to him. He's never truly thought he could feel these these things, and it's spectacular to be able to do so.

He thinks Will recognizes this when he kisses Hannibal's lips with his own quiet insistence, still drawing figure-eights over the sensitive skin of his neck.

Hannibal holds him, cherishes him, recognizes that Will is the most precious thing he's ever encountered.

How blessed he is to be able to hold him like this, to kiss and be kissed by him.

When their mouths become separate entities once more, they keep their faces close, arms cradling each other.

"Is this new for you as well, *mon coeur*?" Hannibal whispers, pressing his lips to the tip of Will's nose. "To feel completely, of your own accord, what the other feels? To have it reflected back instead of reflecting it yourself?"

A shuddering breath escapes Will.

"Yes," he says.

Hannibal exhales as well, sighs in relief and in joy. He moves to Will's ear, so that he might whisper.

"Then come with me, *mon ange*," he pleads, thinking there isn't a single word in a single language worthy of falling upon Will's ears, but he's willing to try all the same. "Let me take you to my bed, allow me to cover you with my mouth, permit me exploration of your body." He takes in a deep breath through his nose, smelling Will's arousal, potent and more delicious than anything that could come from his kitchen. "I will take the newness from this, make it so that it is familiar and beloved, make you the same to me."

Will leans against him completely now, his breathing shallow and excited.

"Keep talking," he says, his voice low and filled with gravel. It's a command more than a statement, actually.

Hannibal can do nothing but oblige, whispering sweet nothings and sweeter everything as he leads Will upstairs, the kitchen forgotten. They stumble up the staircase as they struggle to say close, only just beginning to fumble at the other's clothing.

They pause to push open the door, to turn on the light, and back again to each other.

"Let my hands know your skin as well as anything," Hannibal whispers against Will's neck, and his voice feels strained as if he's begging. "Let me taste you as I have tasted nothing before, that my tongue may crave nothing but you for as long as we live, that--"

"*Hannibal*," Will hisses, yanking at his tie as he pulls him through the threshold and into Hannibal's bedroom. "You can't just *say* that."

"You're right," he amends, and frees himself of the tie completely before going after the buttons of Will's shirt. "I'll have to act on it, won't I?"

Will groans and begins struggling with Hannibal's shirt fervently. Hannibal leaves him to it, already slipping Will's from his shoulders and casting it to the far side of the room. He kisses the thin skin atop Will's shoulder, once, twice, before he continues with his adorations.

"My Will, my sweet Will," he says, pressing his lips to the tender skin below Will's ear, "once you are bare, I will ravish you. Nothing will keep me from your flesh, do you understand? My lips and my tongue will find every part of you--*every part of you*, my Will, and I will make myself at home there--"

He falters only as he hears fabric ripping after Will's frustrated hiss. His shirt, torn in the front, is thrown onto the ground. He stares at it for a moment before Will catches his gaze with a force akin to gravity. Will's eyes seem to glow brighter than the bulbs in the ceiling.

"Do it, then," he tells Hannibal, challenging him.

Before Hannibal can do anything, Will pushes him onto the bed, landing on top of him, ferocity and lust burning off of him like flaming petrol.

"Will," Hannibal says, like his breath has been knocked out of him.

But Will makes it clear that there's no time to account for further reverence, he immediately resumes his work: getting Hannibal's pants off.

Hannibal reciprocates, but with much more grace. He has to help Will once he gets his off, lifting his hips for long enough that his own can be tugged and kicked off, abandoned on the floor.

Nothing between them but their briefs, Hannibal takes to kissing Will's lips again, feeling the soft flesh of his bare chest with his fingertips.

Will, still on top, grinds against him slowly, still caught up with aggressive desire. He wants results, but Hannibal wants to take his time.

Gently, he maneuvers so Will is no longer on top of him, which only results in a protesting growl deep in the back of his throat. Hannibal shushes him and then straddles Will's waist between his thighs.

"Let me fulfill my promises," he implores, kissing at the hollow of Will's neck. "And be still; I have no desire to continue to supplicate--"

"Oh, enough with your fucking flower talk," Will snaps, pushing up against the weight of him. "It was nice foreplay, but can you just *do something* already?"

Hannibal smiles, and he knows it looks fiendish by the thrill emanating from Will when he sees it.

"That was exactly my intention."

He lowers himself to Will's neck, only nipping at first, his tongue darting occasionally to taste. He then begins to suck, not caring how high up on Will's neck he is, only caring to mark.

When Will moans and reaches around to grab at Hannibal's back, he purrs.

"My Will," he murmurs, moving to press against the flesh of Will's collar, "I will have you weakened with my ministrations."

"Yeah," Will grunts, forever the skeptic. He moves his hands to pull at Hannibal's briefs, clearly desperate for action. His voice throaty and irritated, he adds, "All bark and no bite, that's what you are, Hannibal. Useless."

Hannibal takes that as an invitation, and sinks his teeth in the flesh that joins Will's neck to his shoulder.

That gets Will to cry out, to try and buck against him, to *supplicate* so that Hannibal might move so he has something to rut against.

He complies, if nothing but yearning to do as Will asks of him. He takes his time, however, kissing across Will's chest and tasting as he pleases.

Will's nipples taste divine, he finds, less salty than the rest of his flesh. Will does not complain when he lingers there, tongue lavishing him with sensation.

Will's abdomen is slightly furred, more so than his chest, and Hannibal tickles his nose along that sensitive skin before moving lower.

The angle of Will's hips are to be explored, to be honored, to be worshipped, and he runs his fingers over the crests of the bone as he removes Will's underwear so he can breathe in the scent of what lies between his legs.

He bestows kisses on the tender flesh of his inner thighs, gentle and loving. He whispers promises of revisitation to other spaces there, runs his hands along Will's quadriceps as he greets Will's cock.

He tastes first, acquainting himself with it. He becomes familiar with the bulging vein, explores the base and the scent of the hairs there.

"Useless," Will snaps, but he's breathless.

Hannibal looks up and sees that his eyes are blown wide, his jaw slack. "Can you fault me for wanting to savor this?" he murmurs, taking a moment to note the liquid beginning to bead at the head of Will's cock. "I haven't encountered art quite so divine as this. You're beautiful, Will."

"Aren't there better things your mouth could be doing right now?"

"You're enjoying this thoroughly, I think," he says. Keeping his mouth just short of touching Will, he lets his hands find the dip of Will's back against the mattress, feeling his spine and lowering to feel the curve of his ass. "You love knowing how dear I find you, knowing that I recognize your excellence for what it is. You're a divine creature, my darling Will."

"Shut *up*." Will lets out a shaky breath, and his cock twitches.

Hannibal kisses the tip of Will's cock. His tongue darts at the slit to taste the precome, and Will *whines* with it.

"Out of everything in my life," Hannibal says, hovering, ready, "it delights you to discover that you are the finest thing in my reach. Nothing compares to this, Will."

And before Will can agree or protest, Hannibal takes him into his mouth.

"Finally!" Will shouts, shuddering with the touch of Hannibal's tongue, his cheeks, his throat.

Hannibal gives Will everything he can imagine he would want, and the sensation Will's hands clutching at his hair is enough to please him. He sucks and slides, tasting the whole of him, savoring his presence.

As Will becomes undone, thrusting and crying out, Hannibal feels blessed. Every shout and hiss from Will's lips is a confirmation, an agreement.

When Will comes against the back of his throat, he takes it, drinking Will's essence in like wine, kissing back up to his mouth so that he can show Will just how precious he is.

And after a few moments of that, Will is limp and quiet and malleable, and he wriggles free.

"Hannibal," he says, the fire and force fading fast to be replaced with a gentle admiration. His hands move from Hannibal's chest, running through the hair there, to his groin.

Hannibal had nearly forgotten about his own self, hard and still throbbing from excitement. He meets Will's eyes, and with the softness he sees there, the affection, he half-expects Will to begin returning his own poetic murmurings.

But that wouldn't be Will Graham.

"I'm gonna take your cock and jerk it until you see the entire goddamned Milky Way," Will assures him, sultry and spent and hoarse. He lowers himself against Hannibal, pulling off his briefs and taking his length in both hands. "Would use my mouth, but you've got me a little dizzy here myself."

Hannibal laughs, his own voice hoarse (but for slightly different reasons).

"I would be honored," he says, and he continues to grin until Will's worked him to climax.

He does see stars, but with Will right there, he doesn't think he needs the whole galaxy for it to be beautiful.

When he's spent and Will collapses on top of him and rolls to the side, he begins laughing. Laughing like he hasn't laughed in decades, laughing until it hurts, but he can't stop.

Next to him, Will frowns. "You think my handjob was laughable?" he grumbles, throwing an arm over him and nestling into the crook of Hannibal's neck regardless.

"No," Hannibal promises, trying to still himself. "I'm simply... happy."

Will goes to turn off the light, grumbling to himself about useless psychiatrists, and by the time he's returned, Hannibal has calmed down. His joy doesn't subside, however, and it grows within the ecosystem of his soul like a tree of life.

It's joined by several other pleasant creatures that haven't all played together at once in a very long time.

He's relieved, hopeful, at peace, and blissfully pleased all at once.

And terribly, terribly in love.

Chapter End Notes

I spent my damned time writing this. Smut is hard.

Perturbateur

Chapter Notes

cracks knuckles Time to go back to my Hannibal headspace...

(Seriously though, as absent as I've been, this fic has been on my mind and won't be abandoned as long as I have time for it. I'm currently typing this on my phone.)

Hannibal sleeps through the night with Will wrapped in his arms, waking occasionally to check that his beloved isn't plagued by nightmares.

Will sleeps peacefully, stirring only to press himself closer, and that speaks volumes to Hannibal about where they stand.

For hours after the sun rises, Hannibal stays still and awake, watching Will sleep. He's an entirely differently creature when unconscious, without anything to make him suffer or change.

In his sleep, Will is nothing but himself, and Hannibal adores him fully.

He wakes when Hannibal kisses him, soft and slow to pull him from peaceful dreams. His arms coil tighter around Hannibal, his fingers pressing into skin.

"Good morning," says Hannibal, breaking away to better see his eyes.

Will looks well rested, and beautiful because of it. Hannibal takes his hand and strokes at his jaw, running with the grain of his facial hair.

"Can't believe you're here," Will yawns. His hands slide to Hannibal's stomach, where his release from the night before has remained to dry. "And that everything happened."

"And it will again, should you allow it," Hannibal assures him.

Will presses his face to Hannibal's chest, huffs a laugh there, warm and comforting. "Of course I'll allow it."

"You *were* quite insistent," he agrees, smiling shamelessly and feeding his fingers through Will's unruly locks. "I hadn't expected any of that ferocity from you, my Will."

"Yeah, well," Will grumbles, shoving him away playfully, "I wasn't expecting Mister Murder over here to be so gentle with me."

"Did you enjoy it?" Hannibal wonders, though he thinks he knows the answer. He finds himself admiring the mark he left on Will's neck. It *is* quite high up, and will be difficult to hide. He wonders what Will will say to Jack about it.

"Oh, god. Yes I did," he grumbles, turning onto his back. "I expect you to come through with every sappy promise you made to me, by the way."

"Certainly, I will, at another time," he agrees. With a sigh, he throws the mussed covers from himself. "But morning has broken, and I'd like to clean myself." The come on his stomach is tacky and uncomfortable, and he hurries off to the bathroom to deal with it, and Will's gaze is hot on his bare back as he does so.

He wipes himself off with a wet and warm washcloth, keenly aware of Will watching him through the open door.

He intends to do something about that, but then the door bell rings.

"How rude," he sighs. "I wasn't expecting anyone." He leaves the bathroom and begins searching for something to cover himself with, though he truthfully would rather ignore the interruption altogether.

Will sits up with a grimace as it rings again. "I'll stay here, I guess." He tilts his head as Hannibal procures a pair of pajama pants, and adds, "Put on the red one."

"The red one?" he repeats, eyebrows raised.

"The red sweater," Will clarifies, smiling devilishly. "I like how it looks."

Hannibal concedes with a private smile and puts on the red sweater over the matching pants, and heads downstairs. The ringing has reduced to an angry rapping, and Hannibal hurries to answer, the sound jarring his ears.

When he opens it, Jack Crawford is on the other side.

"Jack." Hannibal blinks, trying to bite back the distaste coiling inside of him. Jack is the last person he wants in his home now.

"Sorry to intrude, Doctor," Jack replies unapologetically, pushing past him into the house. His face is set in a scowl, a dark irritation surrounding him and passing over the room in a flurry. "But I haven't heard from Will since I saw you last, and I'm getting worried."

"I see." Hannibal can't see this situation going well, so he bites his tongue for now.

"You haven't heard from him, have you?" Jack demands, his arms crossed, eyes narrowed. "Is he still fishing?"

"I have, and no," Hannibal answers. His own irritation sits like a coiled dragon around his shoulders, languid but ready to strike.

"Okay." Jack's gaze passes over the room in scrutiny, like he can suss out Will just by looking. "Then where the hell is he?"

Hannibal is torn between lying and snapping Jack's neck just to avoid the other unfortunate situation, but before he can do either, he hears Will's footsteps on the stairs.

And he freezes.

"Right here, Jack," Will calls, jaunting down the remaining steps and across the room to join them. "And sorry I didn't call. My phone's dead." He's wearing Hannibal's dark blue robe, which makes him look terribly comfortable. He's left it open enough to reveal a generous portion of his chest, and Hannibal isn't sure whether to appreciate or be mortified by the profanity.

Jack, clearly seething, speaks before he analyzes the situation further. "Then charge it, dammit!"

He hasn't even seemed to notice that Will is in Hannibal's robe and sporting a serious case of bedhead, and for that, Hannibal allows himself to be amused.

"Left it at home accidentally," Will explains, standing next to Hannibal. "I was here having dinner."

And then, Jack blinks, and it all falls into place as his lip twitches and his entire face is possessed by a scowl. He gives both Will and Hannibal a thorough examination, his eyes lingering on the mark on Will's neck.

There are a million scathing things Hannibal expects him to say, but somehow, what Jack actually says is worse than any of them.

"I can't let *this* keep you from work, Will." The agent shakes his head in disapproval. "I need you working to catch the Egalitarian's ass... not Hannibal's."

If that last bit was meant to be a joke, no one finds it funny.

Will all but rolls his eyes, but carries on. "What do you want, Jack?" he demands, hands in the pockets of the robe. "I've just barely pulled myself back together again, so I guess you can yank me back into the field."

Jack narrows his eyes, but doesn't comment on the tone. "I need you at a crime scene, Will. The Egalitarian's finished dealing his latest pair while you were vacationing."

Instinctively, Hannibal winces and wants to lunge, knock Jack backwards and punish him for his disregard. Instead, unabashed, he places an arm around Will's waist.

"Allow me to join," he says. "I should be there to ensure that nothing gets into his head."

"As his psychiatrist?" Jack scoffs, regarding the position of Hannibal's hand with a raised eyebrow. "Because that ship has sailed, Hannibal."

"Which was your initial suggestion," Will points out, leaning into Hannibal pointedly. "This was all your orchestration, Jack."

Jack grimaces and sends a dagger-loaded glare towards Hannibal, but concedes with a sigh. "I've got bigger fish to fry than you two," he says, turning towards the door. "Just follow me to the crime scene."

If Jack hears Hannibal's incredulous "Without *breakfast*?" he doesn't react.

"If it was Gaul," Hannibal says on the car ride to the scene, "the timing of this would make sense. He left our dinner enraged and then decided to conclude the week's killing."

Will, who is driving, scoffs. "We've been over this, Hannibal," he says. "His head doesn't work like the Egalitarian's, no matter what you smelled. This has to be Callum."

Hannibal doesn't argue further. He knows Will could have a point, as reluctant as he is to admit to making a mistake. He is, at the very least, grateful that his observations were of use to Will.

The conclusion Will came to was thanks to him; they worked as a team. And if Hannibal hopes to continue doing that (in committing and not just solving), he decides he should respect Will's conclusion.

Still, something is niggling at him, and he doesn't like it.

He eats one of the leftover strawberries he brought with him, frowning as he does so. The flavor of it reminds him of last night's intimacies, and brings to mind that Gaul and his apprentice clearly do not share the same closeness that he and Will do.

So, how then, he wonders, could Gaul's scent have so strongly imprinted itself on the boy?

He passes a piece of fruit over to Will. "Here," he says, holding it up to Will's mouth. "You need to eat something."

Will gives him a solid dose of side-eye. "I'm driving. *To a crime scene*. You better not get all hot and heavy from this."

"Nonsense," Hannibal assures him. "I'm simply caring for you. There is nothing sexual about it."

Will looks skeptical, and he takes the berry with his hands, popping it into his own mouth. Hannibal sighs in half-disappointment and sets the container on the center console between them. Will eats the fruit with one hand, absent, with his eye on the road.

Hannibal only wishes he had thought to bring walnuts; Will needs more nourishment than just fructose.

He supposes he'll have to be satisfied with the fact that Will looks particularly healthy after their night together.

The scene is inside a quaint, blue house at the edge of Baltimore's downtown area. It's well manicured, and looks out of place behind the yellow tape and flurry of FBI officials.

Will pulls his car in behind Jack's, but stays put for a few moments. He takes note of the house in front of them, and Hannibal takes the opportunity to as well.

"This is a retirement community, yes?" Hannibal inquires. They had come in through a gate that dubbed the area 'Sanction Hills,' though that descriptor hadn't been enough to save the victim.

"I'm guessing," Will answers wryly. "Never seen one. Guess I was expecting more pink flamingos."

Hannibal snorts as Will gets out of the car. He follows after, and his presence is quickly noted by the officials standing by the tape. A mixture of local police and FBI watchdogs approach to stop him, but Jack Crawford barrels forward.

"He's with Graham," he says, pointing at Hannibal.

That seems to placate them, and they disperse. Jack leads Will into the kitchen, and Hannibal follows after. He remembers a time when he had consulted on cases and had been recognized and respected for his own expertise.

Clearly, this isn't one of those times.

Jack stops Hannibal at the door, standing between him and Will. "Give us a minute, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal looks past Will's shoulder and at the body of an elderly woman.

She is splayed out on the ground, as if she'd fallen, but there's nothing suspicious or telling about the corpse otherwise.

The Egalitarian is far from artful; this Hannibal has known, in some way or another.

But perhaps Will is right. Gaul is a gaudy, pretentious man, and this body is neither.

But the boy, Callum. He is a shy creature, one that hides itself to protect itself.

Hannibal feels a presence behind him, pulling him from his thoughts.

"She was one of the donators."

Beverly Katz' voice is dry, like she's tired. Hannibal nods, keeping his gaze fixed on the corpse.

"Connection or not," she adds, stepping to his side, "we've been checking every corpse in a fifty mile radius for arsenic poisoning. Wouldn't want to miss any of his presents."

"No," Hannibal agrees. "Of course not. It would be easier to find the second half that way."

"If their physical aesthetics don't give it away first," Katz reminds him.

He takes another look at the victim. She is in her late sixties, but he scantily recognizes her. He imagines he might have seen her face in a crowd at one event or another, but she doesn't stand out.

"How likely are you to find her counterpart before the Egalitarian kills them, too?" he muses, watching as Will comes into view, in front of what little Hannibal can see.

"Not very," says Katz. "We haven't saved any so far."

"But the donors?"

"At least three that we know of, including you. Surveillance crews scared off what appeared to be the same intruder, but we never caught whoever it was."

Hannibal pauses. "Were any photographs taken?"

They could be the key in determining the difference between Gaul and his boy once and for all.

"No," Katz grunts, and waves her hand. "Come on, though. Jack's about to chase everyone out so your beau can do his thing."

Stricken by the comment, Hannibal allows himself to be led outside by Beverly Katz.

"Feels like there isn't much we can do," she confesses, once they're out on the lawn. "The department's pretty stretched thin. We've got this and the violinist, and Jack's still deadset on devoting half of our resources to catching the Ripper."

A troubling thought. As much as Hannibal appreciates Jack Crawford's attentions, he hates to think that it would prevent the catching of more banal criminals.

Like the Egalitarian, whichever of the two that may be.

Not that he plans to stop his own activities.

"And is Will one of those resources?" he asks, knowing that a working Will is just a few walls away, his mind bleeding into another man's. "Jack isn't overworking him, is he?"

Katz tilts her head and grins. "Wouldn't you be the first to know?"

"I fear Will is afraid of worrying me," he says, keeping his voice low as a few crime scene workers glance at them.

"As if you're supposed to stop now that you're not his therapist?" Katz shakes her head. "I love Will, but the guy's not good with relationships."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

"Not that you wouldn't know," she adds, crossing her arms.

She doesn't squirm under his gaze like Price might, and he admires that. He turns back to regard the house, which admittedly would look just as gaudy with pink lawn flamingos.

"So." Katz clears her throat. "Things are getting serious between you two?"

Hannibal nods, seeing no point in denying her an answer. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you drove him to a crime scene," she says, "and Jack's not seeming as happy about you two as he was initially."

"I imagine not." He smiles, again at the thought of Jack losing his control. "I've been taking up much of our dear Will's time."

Katz snorts. "Apparently so."

Will exits the crime scene ten minutes later, and Hannibal feels himself go cold when he realizes it's not Will's eyes that meet his.

Murky, cold, he sees someone else.

But only for a moment, and then they shift into something more familiar.

Hannibal realizes he's never seen Will fresh out of a crime scene like this.

Part of him wants to know what it looks like when Will's eyes are swimming with the Ripper, when Will reflects his darkness, but another part is afraid of it.

And there's a part of him that already knows what he would see.

Jack trails after Will, his own expression dark. A hand is on his belt, something that looks either defensive or threatening coming from an officer of the law.

"Will," he barks. "We're not done here."

Will doesn't even look at him, just hurries to Hannibal waiting at the Bentley. Katz has gone off to Price and Zeller, who have been snickering about something as they work.

"Maybe you're not," he snaps, "but I'm leaving, Jack." He meets Hannibal's eyes once more, and there's still something foreign there.

Hannibal swallows, understanding what Will means when he says that he feels something lurking inside of him.

"Is everything alright?" he asks, stepping forward to meet him.

Will's gaze flicks over to where Price and Zeller are watching in a kind of impolite rapture, and then back to Hannibal. He nods sharply.

"Let's just go."

Jack, standing back, narrows his eyes.

"Don't tell me you need a crutch now, Will."

Hannibal wants to push the man, to remind him that he was the one that wanted Will to see a therapist in the first place, but Will can and should stand up for himself.

Will takes in a sharp breath.

"Allow me one, Jack," he says, back still turned to him. "I'll be of more use to you that way."

And then he gets into the passenger seat. Hannibal takes in Jack's irate expression, and then goes to the driver's seat to take Will away.

"This one wasn't even staged," Will says, once they've gotten further along on the road.

By unspoken agreement, they're driving to Wolf Trap. That's where Will's dogs are.

"He's getting closer to ultimatum," he continues. "Losing his patience, maybe." Looking pointedly at Hannibal, he adds, "Not frustration, though."

"You're certain it isn't Gaul, then."

Will nods, but doesn't delve any further into it. Hannibal supposes there's no need.

When they get to Will's house, Hannibal makes tea, and they drink it in silence. Will feeds his dogs, and Hannibal curses when he realizes he's forgotten Calypso.

He wants to stay and shower with Will, wash the Egalitarian from him.

He wants to hold him.

But he has other responsibilities. He can't allow anyone into his own without his own supervision, and he can't let Calypso go unattended to.

He kisses Will's forehead before he leaves, telling him to call if he needs anything.

When Will doesn't, when Calypso is fed, when the dinner party and the ballet are just a week away, Hannibal prepares for his next hunt.

Ilinx

Chapter Summary

I wanted Hannibal to kill in time with his emotions, but the meat is getting old....

Since he's serving it for other people at the dinner, let's just say that it makes sense that he froze Vince Barcet's heart and Ahmale Jacob's spine.

Any kills that he does for his own personal food, he usually eats fresh.

Chapter Notes

shoutout to my friend and lovely beta [diamerizein](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Charles Gros is dead the next afternoon, strung by his heels from a tree in the basement of an old church in Virginia.

Hannibal, for the final seconds of strangulation, had wondered if he should have killed someone more significant for the finale of the sounder.

Then, Gros was dead, and Hannibal knew he had planned everything out well enough.

Now, back at his house, he is preparing the man's gluteus muscles. They will marinate in garlic and crushed herbs from his garden for two days, and then will be smoked "low and slow," until the day of the dinner party.

There's still much to do in that time, but he isn't thrilled as he normally would be.

Soon, guests will be sat at his table, Will by his side, and then they'll be off to see the ballet.

He doesn't know why the thought makes his stomach turn.

He imagines smoke filling his lungs, hickory and sickeningly sweet.

Eyes that aren't Will's blink at him in the vision, and he knows that someone has to die.

There can be no one competing for Will's attention.

His first thought goes to the Violinist and the way Will had wept from the nightmare of him.

It won't be too difficult to find Tobias, if Franklyn's suspicions are to be trusted.

Once the meat is in the refrigerator, he retires to his study for some quiet reading. Freddie Lounds, he finds, has already written about the Egalitarian's latest kill, and there's a photo of both him and Will leaving the crime scene in Hannibal's car.

Unsurprisingly, the article's focus is more trained on his and Will's involvement in the case (as well as with each other) than the actual murder. He wonders if Lounds' readers are getting tired of the Egalitarian's predictable kills.

Admittedly, their frequency is admirable. Two a week, for six weeks (if the deadline of the ballet is to be the assumed end). The Egalitarian has a high kill count, and he will be remembered for that.

There have certainly been killers with much more artistic value simply because they got caught before they could carry on.

The Egalitarian will be remembered for his tenacity.

On the other hand, the Violinist will be cut short before he can find his second victim.

Hannibal opens up the Tor browser on his tablet (it wouldn't do to have the FBI monitoring his activity) and searches for anyone named Tobias in the Baltimore area.

The first result is one Tobias Budge, and Hannibal recognizes him as the man who accompanied Franklyn to the opera. Tall and imposing, indeed.

He runs a strings shop in downtown Baltimore, and teaches private violin lessons.

Hannibal smiles, closes the tab, and calls Will. Two rings, and then he's answered.

"Will, darling?" he hums, leaning back in his chair.

He can hear the mutterings of the forensic team in the bathroom, and his smile fades some. He would have hoped Will didn't return to the case so soon, but it would seem that Jack remains as tenacious as the man he hunts.

"Hannibal," Will answers, his tone hushed. "Is everything alright?"

"Would you abandon your work and join me for dinner tonight?"

An amused sigh. "You really are set on pissing Jack off, aren't you?"

"I simply desire your company," Hannibal counters. "And your insight. I've an idea to discuss with you."

Jack's raised voice comes jarring through the line, and Hannibal stiffens. Will sighs again.

"It's Hannibal," he says, mouth away from the speaker. To Hannibal, he adds, "I'll see you tonight. But I won't be staying."

"I'll make the concession. For you, of course." He closes his eyes, tastes a declaration that this is neither the time nor place for, and swallows it back down. "Take care, Will."

"You're clingy," Will tells him, merriment in his tone, and hangs up.

Perhaps Hannibal is clingy.

He waits by the door for twenty minutes until Will arrives, and he forces himself to not greet him at the car. He waits by the coat hanger to answer the door.

Of course, Will doesn't knock or ring, and instead opens the door with a key Hannibal doesn't remember giving him.

They both blink at each other in surprise, and then Will's face cracks into a wide smile.

"How long were you waiting to answer the door for me?"

Hannibal presses his lips together before admitting, "Too long."

"I thought so," Will chuckles. He's clearly amused, having seen Hannibal acting the fool for him.

Sighing, he decides to salvage his attempt at chivalry by taking Will's coat. He moves to do so, chastising himself for being *clingy* as he does so. Just as his fingers brush the shoulder's of Will's coat, he's taken by surprise.

Hands grip the sides of his face, and eyes—decidedly Will's eyes—meet his own. Feeling like it's a sin, Hannibal breaks that gaze to see Will's wide and sweet smile.

Will kisses him, that smile never wavering. The enjoyment, the mirth, is contagious, and Hannibal smiles, too. Their noses bump, Will's hands move to card through Hannibal's hair, and Hannibal wants to wrap him close and keep this moment bottled between them.

After a moment, Will has stepped free and is shrugging off his own coat, a visage of cheer lingering. Hannibal, partially dumbstruck, steps to hang the coat for him, but it's done before he can get there and he just runs into him.

The laughter peeling from Will's lips should aggravate him, but Hannibal does not feel mocked.

"You're unbelievable," Will says at last.

"Greet me like that every day," Hannibal finds himself saying, "and I fear I won't be able to believe myself, either."

Another kiss is pressed to his lips, and he can do nothing but watch as Will slips away into the kitchen, following the scent of food.

Hoping to clear his head, to find a buffer, Hannibal retrieves Calypso from the room she's claimed on the ground floor.

"Can you imagine?" he mutters, and takes the leather plush she's been chewing on from her. He picks her up, and she licks at his hands. In the two weeks since he's taken her home, she's grown from proper feeding, and she weighs heavy against him.

"I'm lost to him," he tells her. "You're proof enough of that."

Will plays with Calypso and sips at wine while Hannibal prepares for dinner.

As he listens to the two of them roughhouse, he contemplates his state of being. How he practically turned to putty when Will kissed him, how he's still filled with *glee* when he remembers the joy with which Will did so.

He's delighted that he's not the sole initiator, that perhaps he and Will can achieve a state of mutual affection, and a casual one at that.

It should be so *mundane*, but it doesn't feel that way.

He finishes cleaning the counters and takes the plates out of the warming oven. In an attempt to cater to Will's casual nature, he's prepared a simple dinner for the two of them.

A lazy meal; one he won't feel bad about eating in front of the fire instead of at the table.

He scoops fennel and orzo from the skillet and onto the plates, and piles chicken thighs on top of those. Drizzling the plates with lemon juice and melted butter, he finishes with a few decorative sprigs of the wispy fennel greens.

He sets it all on a tray and carries it into the sitting room. His heart catches in his throat when he sees Will lying on his back, Calypso curled up on his chest.

"Dinner," he announces, and sets the tray down.

Will sighs and picks up Calypso, setting beside him and watching as she patters away into the kitchen, where Hannibal has habitually left her food. It's the easiest room to clean beside the basement, after all.

"We need beanbags," Will remarks, shifting his weight. "The floor's not comfortable."

"There is a perfectly functional dining table," Hannibal reminds him.

Smiling, Will looks at the tray on the ground, at Hannibal already sat on the ground. "I'm sure you could find some fancy ones," he says. "Leather skin, stuffed with... something other than beans."

"Something," he agrees, and tries to be repulsed at the thought of adding *beanbags* to the decor.

Unfortunately, it seems appealing.

Will takes a plate from the tray and immediately digs in. He eats the chicken thigh with his hands, and he grins through a mouthful of it.

"How can you even stand me?"

Hannibal sighs, more warmth filling him (head to toe, somehow). He takes his own plate, though he uses a fork and knife. "I ask myself that daily."

"But you keep dealing with me anyway," Will says.

"We all have our flaws."

Laughing, Will reaches for a napkin (cloth; Hannibal isn't a degenerate) to wipe his fingers with. "I think you've done worse things than tolerate me," he chuckles. "Speaking of. This is actual bird."

"I have so save our prize meat for Friday's party," he says. "Though I appreciate your eagerness. It belies your own flaws."

Will grunts as he sloppily takes another bite of food. "Maybe my tolerating you is *my* worst flaw. Jack seems to think so."

"Jack Crawford has flaws aplenty," Hannibal points out. "His tendency to overwork you, for instance."

Rolling his eyes, Will elbows him. There's still some distance between them, and Hannibal wants to see if Will chooses to be the one to breach it.

"As much as I would love to hear a cannibal's moral critique of an FBI agent," he says, "you did say you had something to discuss."

"Indeed," Hannibal sighs, and the exhale seems to leech out the lightness that had gathered within him. "I've been wondering about the Violinist. Have there been any breaks in the case?"

Will sighs, too, and Hannibal aches with the way that his shoulders seem to sag. He's lurched with the image of Will's eyes being filled with Tobias Budge, and he almost regrets bringing it up.

But there will be a reward for both of them in the end.

"No," Will says. "We've been busy. Prioritizing other killers."

"Another flaw of Jack's," Hannibal sighs. "He could very easily catch the Violinist if he looked away from the Ripper, and now he'll lose one to the other."

With a clink, Will sets down his fork, abandoning the half-eaten plate. He turns to look at Hannibal, his right eye glowing with its proximity to the fire.

"Oh?"

Hannibal nods, taking one last bite of the orzo before he abandons it in favor of conversation.

"Do you remember Tobias Budge?" he inquires. Noting the lack of recognition on Will's face, he presses on. "We met him at the opera last month. I've recently learned that he owns a string shop downtown and teaches violin. According to his dear friend Franklyn, he also expressed a desire to play a man like one."

Will swallows, understanding dawning on his face. "You don't plan to turn him in to the FBI, do you?"

"I can't, legally, unless my patient gives me permission to," he points out. "But I can dispose of him. I wouldn't want him crawling any further into that lovely head of yours."

"Dispose?" Will repeats. He licks at his lips, enticed as much as he is enticing.

"If you wish," Hannibal says. "I would create a display for you. *Only* you, Will. Jack would never find and defile it."

A secret thing, one for Will and Will alone.

An elegant thing, for Will to admire and for time to destroy.

Red and black and gory and all for Will.

A shaky exhale falls from his lips, and he finally breaches the space between them, placing a hand on Hannibal's thigh. He leans in.

"What can I do?"

Hannibal leans into the touch, but his imagination has already carried him to his next tableau.

It's deep in the woods, far off the beaten path. Tobias Budge is tied by his own guts, his fingers cut off so he can never play again, replacing his eyes in their sockets.

A burst of color beneath him: the red of sweet williams adorning the earth.

Will's hand on the nape of his neck pulls him back to the present. He takes a shaking breath of his own.

"Distract Jack from the Violinist until I've made him disappear. It will only be a few days."

"I can do that."

When Charles Gros' buttocks have been smoking for a day, Jack Crawford discovers the rest of the body.

"You've done enough distracting of your own," Will whispers into the phone. "Why don't you ever *warn* me?"

Hannibal chuckles into the phone as he pulls his kill suit from its place in the basement. "I'm warning you now," he says. "But only because it's solely yours to know of."

Will's voice catches on the other end. There's no specificity to the conversation, but it's risky enough, with Will at a Ripper crime scene as they speak.

"Be careful," he says. "There are other eyes in his shop."

He hangs up, and Hannibal smiles. Will did his research, it seems. Hannibal knew about the security cameras, of course, but he won't be snaring Budge there.

The man is much more vulnerable in his home.

Tobias Budge, for all his self-importance, is an easy kill.

At first, he's hideously delighted at Hannibal's presence. His eyes slip over Hannibal's vinyl suit, and his eyes pool with lust.

"I was wondering when the Ripper would come to see me," he sighs, tilting his head. "I had hoped he would like my message. I hadn't, of course, anticipated him to be you."

He takes a step closer (a foolish mistake) and grins. "You *are* the Ripper, aren't you, Doctor Lecter?"

Hannibal remains still, readying himself to strike.

"I wonder what your pet would think of you coming here," Budge continues breathily. "For *me*."

Hannibal breaks his neck then, reaching out swiftly. The crack of bones is music to his ears.

"No," he whispers to Budge's corpse. "I am here for Will."

Chapter End Notes

After I wrote the bit with Calypso, a dog started whining outside my building. It's whining still and my heart hurts.

I want a dogggggggggggggggg

["lazy" dinner](#)

Décalage

Chapter Notes

Here we are. A chapter in Will's perspective. The Big Dinner.

It's Friday afternoon when the flowers arrive.

Will is in lecture, because, as much as Hannibal *wants* to have a monopoly on Will's life, he does have a job to keep.

A secretary already popped her head into his classroom a few minutes before, but he chased her off and continued showing slides of the Egalitarian's early kills to his shockingly bored students.

He's muttering to himself about short attention spans when the door bursts open again. This time, it's a maintenance worker, and *she* is much more confident than the secretary was.

She carries a large white box with her, a gruff look on her face. All eyes fall on her, and Will sighs. There's no point in chasing her out now.

The maintenance worker (her name tag dubs her 'Peggy') crosses to the front of the classroom and sets the package on Will's untidy desk.

Half to the class and half to him, she says, "The guy who sent it paid me extra to give it to you now."

Will frowns. He would have thought Quantico security were better than that, but the fact that the box is in his classroom means that the sender was likely a familiar face.

"He also says he wants you to open it now."

And that pulls it together.

Hannibal sent this.

"Thank you," Will grits. "Is he still there?"

"No," Peggy tells him, her gaze flitting over the classroom. The students are all watching in avid curiosity. "He wants you to open it immediately, though."

Great.

"Sure thing," he says, ushering her to the door. "I do have a class to teach, though. Thank you again."

He closes the door behind her and turns back to his students with a scowl.

"As I was saying," he continues, narrowing his eyes in challenge, "the Egalitarian shows—"

He's cut off when a student accepts that challenge and clears his throat. "Aren't you going to open it?"

Will blinks and stalks back to his podium. "No."

Another student pipes up. "It could be important."

"It could be from a murderer," another one adds.

The excitement in the room is building. His students haven't been so engaged in *weeks*.

Will groans. "I'm sure the package is entirely benign."

"Then why not open it?" the first student demands.

"Because we're on a schedule. And I find it appalling that you all are more interested by my social life than by one of the most prevalent serial killers of our time."

That shuts them up, and the rest of the class goes without incident. The enormous package waits on his desk.

When the period is over, however, no one rises from their seats. Glued by a hive-minded curiosity, they wait, eyes fixed on him.

He glares at all of them as he returns to his desk. "If I open it, will you all leave me alone?"

He's met by a chorus of yeses.

"I hadn't realized I was teaching a middle school class," he grumbles, but pulls out his pocket knife anyway. He cuts open the box, and he's immediately met with a burst of red and pink.

Flowers.

"Sweet williams," one of the student calls.

He glares at her. "If only you were so quick to answer questions I actually pose."

More silence.

He takes the note attached to the lid.

The other half were ruined, I'm afraid. I hope these are enough incentive for you to arrive early tonight. I have a suit ready for you at my home.

Be prepared for an exciting evening.

-H

Will scoffs and assumes that the other half were part of Hannibal's secret tableau for him. He's not thrilled as thrilled about the dinner, but he had agreed to host, so he *will* be arriving early.

Anticipation crawls under his skin as he realizes that this is the end of the Egalitarian's hunt, and things will be drawing to a close soon.

He wonders what waits for them at the ballet.

Checking his watch, he finds he has just enough time to arrive at Hannibal's by four. He glances up at his students, who are still waiting on their toes.

"You got what you wanted," he snaps. "Now, leave, so I can get to dinner on time."

Snickers break out among them, but they exit all the same.

Will arrives a little later than expected, but long before any of the first guests. He's grateful for the empty driveway, and enters using the key he slipped from Hannibal's bedroom a week prior.

He knows Hannibal doesn't mind him having it, but he enjoys the sneaky feeling of using it.

He hears a concerto playing on speakers in the kitchen and Hannibal humming along with it. The sound, playful and innocent, sends his stomach into an elated flip.

Tiny claws patter on the floor, and Calpyso comes to greet him at the door.

Well-trained already. Prim and calm, just like Hannibal.

He thinks that in times of necessity, she might prove to be just as violent as him, given her background.

Will has often wondered about Hannibal's background. What exactly drove him to kill? To cannibalize? People aren't just *born* like that, just like dogs aren't.

His own past is plenty tainted, and he partially pegs it as the reason why he was so quick to give into Hannibal's darkness.

His own darkness, really. He simply found a reflection in Hannibal. A watery one, twisted and rippled and hard to identify, but at the core, they're similar.

He reaches down to scratch between Calypso's ears, and she tilts her head up, wagging her tail.

"What a good girl," he tells her.

"Will?" Hannibal calls, still in the kitchen. "Is that you?"

"Yes," he responds. He's certain Hannibal knows it's him. Otherwise, he wouldn't be standing right now.

Standing straight, he goes to the kitchen, Calypso on his heels. He finds Hannibal elbow-deep in massaging a kale salad, but he isn't alone.

A few people dressed in white scurry around the kitchen, obviously helping him prepare.

Will swallows nervously. He had *hoped* their time together before the dinner would be private, but then again, it's on him for being late.

"Will," Hannibal says, and turns around. Oil glistens on his fingers from the salad. "I'm glad you made it."

"I wasn't planning on abandoning ship," Will reminds him. He shifts as the curious eyes of Hannibal's assistants land on him. "Though," he adds, "I hadn't realized you ever allowed hired help into your home."

He thinks meaningfully of the flesh that Hannibal so delicately *acquires*. He can't imagine allowing anyone else to handle it.

Then again, maybe it's part of the thrill.

Hannibal smiles, pointed teeth showing. "I wouldn't risk preparing this dinner all alone," he says. "Would you mind helping?"

"I'm not sure I'd be so useful," he replies, glancing at the woman expertly chopping vegetables at the counter.

"I was hoping you'd take Calypso outside."

The fondness in Hannibal's eyes warms Will some.

"That I can do."

"I'm aware." Hannibal steps forward, hands still at his side, and leans in to hover near Will's neck, taking a deep breath. "I'd also ask that you shower and borrow my cologne. Somehow, you smell like the lab."

Unsurprised by the request, Will says, "I'll do that. My suit is upstairs, too?"

Hannibal lingers. "Yes."

Will realizes that Hannibal is waiting for something, that he's unsure of the precedent to set for the evening's behavior.

The proverbial ball is in Will's court.

He kisses Hannibal adjacent to his mouth, and feels the gazes of the hired staff burning into him.

He steps back, cheeks flushed in that embarrassing way that they always do, and retreats to take Calypso outside, where she won't bother the guests.

The suit Hannibal has chosen for him is a deep red.

A dark, threatening color, it waits for him, laid out on Hannibal's bed. His skin tingles inexplicably when he looks at it, so he withdraws to the bathroom.

He feels strange, using Hannibal's shower. He's only ever used the guest bathrooms.

This one is larger, more luxurious—though nothing in Hannibal's house is anything short of royal. He's overwhelmed by brass fixtures and stone floors, and quickly slips off his clothes.

He doesn't even need to wait for the water to heat up, and it feels scalding for the first few seconds.

Then, he succumbs to the heat and lets the water envelop him. He washes his hair with Hannibal's scentless shampoo, and takes his advice and uses a dollop of conditioner.

Hannibal's soap is scentless, too, which doesn't surprise him. He imagines that, with a nose like his, it can get overwhelming.

Then again, Hannibal can probably smell "scentless" things, too.

He's like a dog, in that way.

Will emerges from the shower clean and free of any odor that clung to him after a day at Quantico. He finds a bottle of cologne left out on the counter, and he assumes that it's the one that Hannibal has chosen for him.

It smells woody, but he doesn't have any more descriptors for it. He's sure Hannibal will have some pretentious adjectives to throw at him later.

Towel still clinging to him, he reenters the bedroom and puts on the suit.

Hannibal has also gotten him new underwear to go with the suit. He isn't sure if it's presumptuous, obnoxious, or thoughtful. He decides to wear them anyway, if only because they're terribly soft.

When he drops his towel, he half expects Hannibal to pop into the room and sidle up behind him. He wouldn't be averse to it.

But he manages to dress almost fully until Hannibal appears, and it does surprise him. Will doesn't notice the silent footfalls until they're right behind him, and Hannibal's hand is resting on his shoulder.

He takes another whiff of Will, and the privacy lends him the ability to press himself close. His nose in the crook of Will's neck tickles, but he leans into it.

"Like what you smell?" he asks.

Hannibal doesn't remove himself, and murmurs, "Yes, of course," into his skin.

"Good. You picked the scent, after all."

"No," Hannibal says, and pulls back. "What I smell is entirely you. I just chose something to accentuate it."

Will has trouble believing that.

"If you say so."

Smiling, Hannibal leads him towards the mirror, lined up behind Will so he can regard the both of them in the mirror. Will sees his hungry expression even in the reflection, and he shivers when Hannibal presses himself against his back.

"Do you like the color?" he asks, and runs a hand along Will's chest.

"It's morbid," Will replies, watching the way his fingers trail the buttons. "But I'd expect nothing else from you."

"It makes you look dangerous," Hannibal says, and steps back to retrieve the tie from where Will left it crumpled on the bed. He smooths it out and returns to loop it around Will's neck.

It's a subtle gray and black plaid, an homage to Will's own stylistic preferences.

He's never liked people going near his neck, and given Hannibal's tendencies, he shouldn't like it now, either. But Hannibal's mere presence, even through the fabric of his shirt, feels splendid.

When the knot is tied, Hannibal's arms loop around Will's waist, and his chin digs into his shoulder. In the reflection, he looks entirely adolescent.

"Are you ready, Will?" he hums, the vibration of it piercing through the both of them.

"Hardly," Will answers. "But duty calls."

He expects Hannibal to retract and lead him back downstairs, but he stays there. Will doesn't argue, and places his hands over Hannibal's at his stomach, encouraging the embrace.

They make for a handsome image, he decides.

"Will you let me kiss you tonight?" Hannibal asks.

A quiet request. Surprisingly hesitant.

"In front of everyone?" Will queries, pressing their cheeks together. Part of him wishes he had shaved, but his own stubble against Hannibal's smooth skin is pleasant all the same.

"Yes." Hannibal lets out an exhale. *"Darling."*

Will wants to laugh, but the request is entirely serious, and he doesn't want to betray his nervousness.

It's all been fair and good, pretending to be in a relationship and actually engaging in one behind the scenes, but bringing any truth to it makes him want to curl up and hide.

This—what he has with Hannibal, right now—is his alone.

But the exhilaration he can see in Hannibal's eyes and feel on his breath is intoxicating, and he can't deny the request.

"You can," he answers. "Should, even. Might knock the socks off of your prissy friends."

Hannibal smiles and takes another lingering breath.

"Our guests await, then," he says.

They walk downstairs together, Hannibal's arm around Will's waist.

He feels like a prize when they reach the bottom step, with the eyes of all of Hannibal's associates on him. Their gazes look hungry, but theirs is different from Hannibal's: less predatory, more like

scavengers.

Vultures.

Dinner goes well.

Will finds a perverse pleasure in watching the guests eat Hannibal's kills.

In a sick but exciting game of roulette, Will tries and guess which dishes are made with people.

He knows the appetizer ("oxtail" stew) is really the spinal cord of the young student left at the bottom of a fountain in D.C. It tastes like loneliness and rage, and his toes curl with it.

The supposed beef heart is really Vince Barcet's, and he savors that dish because he knows that, in a way, it's what brought him and Hannibal together. He still remembers that particular Ripper scene, how everything seemed to rush together for him.

(Hannibal Lecter, the Chesapeake Ripper, the one he wants to meld himself into and slide free of to become something new and equal and beautiful.)

The heart tastes like the softness of Calypso's fur, the intensity of Hannibal's kisses, the heat of the fireplace in the sitting room.

From his head of the table to Hannibal's, he makes eye contact with Hannibal, and the rest of the table is forgotten.

He can't quite place the third kill, though, the one that they found underneath an old church. He tastes countless dishes, nothing vegetarian, and isn't sure until he takes a bite of something smoky and his gut lurches with something like affection, like possessiveness.

He isn't sure if it's his empathy or Hannibal's intense projection, but he really does feel something when he eats his kills.

When he wonders what it would be like to eat someone slaughtered by his own hand, Hannibal smiles at him like he's read his mind.

Dessert is something made with blood and chocolate, and the tang of the blood makes him want to sing with victory and he wonders if it belonged to Tobias Budge.

Once it's done and conversation dwindles, Will takes note of their guests.

Ms. Komeda from their night at the opera is the only one he can recognize.

Jeremy Gaul and his apprentice were not invited, which gives Callum time to prepare something nasty for the ballet.

He wants to see him try, with the FBI already staked out at the theatre.

Hannibal rises when the staff have taken away everyone's plates, and he raises his half-empty wine glass into the air.

"The night is far from over, friends," he announces. "Before we all depart to enjoy tonight's performance at the ballet, I would like to thank my partner for helping me prepare all of this." He nods at Will, directing everyone's gazes towards him. "My sweet Will."

Will thinks of the flowers, of the fact that Hannibal referred to him as his partner, and it's enough to distract him from everyone else.

The quiet, polite applause that would normally mortify him is barely noticeable, and he smiles wide at Hannibal.

The Baltimore Ballet Theatre is lit up from the outside with spotlights, highlighting the grand building in the dark of the night.

Will knows that it's likely to make it easier for Jack's team hiding outside, but it's beautiful all the same.

Before he and Hannibal can even exit the car, they're reminded of the FBI's presence. An agent sidles up to their car and discreetly gives them wires to wear inside, in case they encounter their killer.

Will shows Hannibal how to put it on, amused by how disgruntled he is by the rumpling of his suit.

"I wasn't aware we would be wearing these," he mutters. "It spoils the evening, don't you think?"

It *is* a bit of a killjoy to think that Jack will be able to hear everything that they say. It will put a damper on their communication.

"We're here because of the investigation," Will reminds him, patting the spot over Hannibal's microphone just because he knows it will make an ugly sound for the agents listening in. "But I agree. Jack only sprung it on me this morning."

Hannibal glowers. "He hadn't thought to mention it sooner?"

"We all thought the Egalitarian would be caught by now."

The irritation on Hannibal's face is still unusually palpable, so Will placates him with a slow kiss.

If the microphones pick up on the exaggerated mouth noises, that's the FBI's problem.

They get out of the car together, met by the cool air, and go towards the entrance arm in arm. The guests from Hannibal's party have mostly already gone through the entrance, but their own lateness is entirely excusable once Will musses his hair some.

Hannibal seems pleased by that.

They're allowed entrance without much hassle, and when they enter the enormous foyer, Will is extremely aware of Hannibal's hand low on his back.

He's reminded of his own behavior at the art gallery, and he wonders if Hannibal's peers expect this from them.

"Should we try and piss off the homophobes again?" Will whispers, leaning against him.

"Of course," Hannibal replies, equally low. "I *had* planned to make a show of kissing you."

Jack's voice crackles into their ears, disapproving.

"Gentlemen, *please* keep your hands to yourselves. I shouldn't have to remind you that you're our only eyes on the inside."

The sound that comes from Hannibal is nothing short of a snicker. Will leans further into him for it, placing his arm around Hannibal's waist.

Only a handful of patrons pay them any mind; the foyer is mostly full as everyone chatters excitedly about the performance. Red curtains and the golden lights dangling from the ceiling make for an opulent environment, and Hannibal thrives in opulent.

So, Will knows that even if there *are* heads turning in disdain, nothing will be done about it. If anything, he expects admiration to be directed towards his date.

The ballet starts in a twenty minutes, which leaves them a reasonable amount of time to sort themselves out and find Callum, who is most likely helping to cater the event.

Will has already given Jack his revised profile of the Egalitarian, though an admittedly sparse one. He only wanted to provide Jack with the information he could have gleaned *without* Hannibal's intervention.

Jack's voice crackles back into their ears.

"Look for maintenance staff," he orders. "Anyone mingling with the patrons, too."

"I know what I'm doing," mutters Will, though he angles his head towards Hannibal's ear to make it look more like a salacious whisper.

Hannibal smirks as his hand leaves Will's back. "I'll go check with the waitstaff. A drink, Will?"

Will looks where Hannibal's gaze is pointed. He sees a young man with strawberry blond hair behind a bar in the corner. He leans on the counter, the jacket of his tux shucked off, and chats with an older woman.

Off to the side, Jeremy Gaul sulks, watching the boy while a pair of men try and talk to him. Will wonders, then, if Gaul's degrading comments at dinner had been projection more than anything else.

It certainly adds an interesting piece to Callum's motive, he thinks. Are the two lovers? Or are Gaul's affections unrequited?

Do the Egalitarian's motives have anything to do with that at all?

"No need, *love*," Will tells him, hoping to slip in as many pet names as possible so long as Jack is listening. "I'll handle the drinks. Isn't that the jeweler in the corner? Why don't you chat with him?"

"What jeweler?" Jack demands.

"I'll see if he's still willing to design your gift," Hannibal answers.

Will grins at him, feeling utterly *devious*.

They part ways, each to another half of the evening's competition. Will makes a beeline for the bar, grateful for Jack's silence in his earpiece. Part of him wishes he had a similar way to communicate with Hannibal, but he knows they'll rejoin for the performance itself.

Callum's eyes fall on him as he approaches, a quick curious glance, and then linger. Will scratches at his collar, minding to not draw attention to the wire under his shirt, and slides up to the bar.

"Double bourbon. Neat."

Callum tips his head and smiles. "Long night ahead?"

Will offers a huff. "I don't do social events."

"Watch it, Will," Jack says into his earpiece. "We need you to stay alert."

From across the room, Hannibal must hear it, too, because he looks over at Will with raised eyebrows.

Will ignores them both.

"Not one for this kind of thing, then?" Callum asks, already pouring the liquor into a wide glass.

"In another life, maybe," Will answers. He glances away for a moment, coy.

Callum smiles and hands him the drink. "Cheers to that," he says.

Will wonders if he can actually hear Jack clutching the edge of his seat, or if he's just imagining it.

"You're with Doctor Lecter, I see," Callum adds, nodding in his direction.

There's obvious disdain in the bartender's voice; he *had* planned to kill Hannibal, Will supposes. He looks over and sees that Hannibal has moved on to another patron, and wonders if Gaul rejected him, still bitter about their dinner together.

More likely, he thinks, Hannibal is trying to muddy the water for Jack by finding other suspects. Will isn't sure what their endgame is, but he knows they don't want it to be too easy to find the Egalitarian, after an entire month with barely any leads.

"Indeed I am," Will replies, and baits the boy with a slight grimace. "Do you know him?"

"Through another, I'm afraid," Callum tells him, pursing his lips. "Though they're all the same, your pursuer and mine, don't you think?"

Another crackle warns Will of Jack's voice. "Keep this one talking, Will."

He frowns, almost certain that Callum knows who he is, especially if he and Gaul discussed their dinner together. Does the boy *want* to be caught? Or is he stupid enough to assume that Will wouldn't come into the ballet with a fucking wire?

This is too easy. He doesn't like it.

"Do I know your *pursuer*?" he asks, and props his elbows on the bar. He takes a sip of the bourbon; it's smooth, expensive, and he can't imagine the price of the tickets if this is complementary.

"It's likely," Callum answers, his voice low. He leans in close, meeting Will's gaze for a brief second before looking behind him, across the room. "Jeremy Gaul. Ugly, but terribly rich. Keeps me on my feet."

His words make Will's stomach roil, and he's immediately, completely certain that Callum is the Egalitarian.

He sees it, then: the contempt this boy harbors for the wealthy, and not just the system that allows it. He killed both the rich and the poor, after all. Equalized them, just as they were meant to be.

The boy sees himself more worthy than Gaul in every way, and yet he is the one that has to work for his piece.

"I do know him," Will confesses. "You must be his apprentice?"

Not that he hadn't known that all along.

"I'm a much better jeweler than he'll ever be," Callum purrs. "But I find he has other uses, so I keep him around."

That gives Will pause.

Is he keeping Gaul around?

Who would that make his final victim, then?

There hasn't been another body, which either means that the night's kill isn't the final one, or both halves are going to be killed tonight.

Or the ballet connection is something else entirely.

Will takes a long swallow of the whiskey, only to feel Hannibal's hand on his shoulder a moment later.

Steadying him when he needs it.

"Darling," Hannibal murmurs, his hand sliding down to intertwine with Will's. "It's time we take our seats."

"Already?" Will asks. Something heavy settles in his gut.

Callum blinks at them and smiles blithely.

Will grips Hannibal's arm like it's a lifeline.

Décalage: Seconde Partie

Chapter Notes

So, I chose La Bayadere back in June (was it really June when I started this? wow, hello october), and never expected to see it in person because I'm not that kind of person... but then I was at a show and the opening performance was a scene from it, and somehow I recognized it and screamed "THIS IS LA BAYADERE" to a kid next to me and they said "...yeah, dude" and no one could figure why I was so excited...

But, admittedly, beyond that experience and the synopsis I read, I don't know much about it. As we speak I'm skipping through a [video](#) of it to get some details, but we'll see how it goes...

Also, [this is the bathroom sink](#) I was imagining. Idk why it's relevant, but I'm just really passionate about quirky sinks.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They find their seats in the upper balcony just moments before the pit orchestra begins the first chords.

Will feels Hannibal all but slip away into the music as soon as the dancers appear on stage. He can't do the same himself, though he feels a strong and compelling urge to just melt into Hannibal's serenity.

But his anxiety keeps him alert.

Something is wrong; he just has to figure out what it is.

He jitters through the entirety of the first act, looking everywhere to see if he can spot Gaul or Callum or anything suspicious. He just about jumps out of his skin when Hannibal places a hand on his thigh.

"Will," he sighs, and leans in so his breath is just below Will's ear. "I've dreamt of this scene often. Would you do the same with me?"

The lips suddenly ghosting along Will's jaw make him shiver. "What?"

Hannibal lets out a quiet groan, but it's not a dissatisfied one. He sounds almost *drunk*, though Will knows he hasn't drank anything since dinner.

"Nikiya and Solor swore their eternal love over a sacred fire," he explains, and kneads into Will's thigh. "Would you do the same with me?"

The crackle in Will's ear startles him and makes him stiffen.

"Focus, boys. Don't forget you're our only inside eyes."

Will clenches his jaw, looking away from Hannibal. "I'm plenty focused."

Hannibal frowns and retracts his touch, sobered. "I have a feeling you're not referring to the performance."

Will isn't sure if he's remiss or relieved at the lack of contact. "We've bigger fish to fry, Hannibal."

"That's right," Jack interjects. "I need you both out during intermission to search out anyone suspicious. Earlier, if you can. Will, try that bartender you spoke to. Hannibal, try looking elsewhere."

Hannibal doesn't react. His eyes are back on the stage, his hands folded in his lap. It's not a good sign, but Will's more concerned about the wire dangling loose from Hannibal's shirt.

"Put that back in," he chides, touching his collar.

Hannibal ignores him.

"It's fine, Will," grumbles Jack. "You're or closest thing to a certified field agent, anyhow. Just... keep your eyes peeled."

Will lets out a grunt of agreement, which causes Hannibal to glower. The change in his expression is barely noticeable, however, and it reminds Will of the affect Hannibal wears around everyone else.

"I'm getting a drink," he mutters, and stands to push past Hannibal and out of the theatre. The first act is coming to a close, so it's a suitable time to leave, anyhow.

No one pays him any heed as he slips back into the light of the foyer; not that there are any people to notice him, anyway. It's almost entirely empty.

Will bites his cheek when he sees that the bar is unmanned.

Under his breath, he curses. "No drink, then."

He hopes Jack picks up on his mood and takes it for more than just bitterness and a thirst.

Scanning the room, he can't find any familiar faces among the attendants dotting the walls. He does spot a sign for the restrooms, however, and goes for that. If he doesn't catch Callum drowning Gaul in a toilet there, then at least he can take a piss and have a moment to clear his head.

The bathroom, as expected, is as lavish as the rest of the building, and the ceilings are just as high. The lights hanging from the ceiling are all contained orbs, delicate and bright. Will counts a dozen private stalls and no exposed urinals. The mirror is one long slab of glass, and the counter is a slick black marble tilted upwards to allow for draining. He keeps track of the colors to ground himself (all grays and blacks and whites and a touch of gold) and listens carefully for any signs of life. When he's sure he's alone, he goes into a stall and takes a piss.

He knows he's being paranoid. Sure, Callum is acting suspicious, but he's also killed over a dozen people, so that's a given. What reason does he have to kill Will, after all?

Besides Hannibal, of course.

Will's hands freeze just as he zips his fly.

Oh, god, he thinks. *Hannibal*.

What had he said, during the dinner after he'd first begun to figure Hannibal out?

I think he'll go looking for his Copycat.

How hard could it have been, anyway? Nolak died before Hannibal could; they fit the same profile. It couldn't have been that much of a leap when considering the *other* profiles Hannibal fits...

And, *god*, that means that the Egalitarian knows about Hannibal, and when they capture him they'll know to go after Hannibal, too--*fuck*, if they haven't started piecing it together already--

The crackle in his ear makes his entire body go cold.

"Will? Are you alright?"

Will steadies himself against the stall door and lets out a grunt of assent, even if he isn't, and then undoes the latch and steps out to wash his hands.

They're trembling, and he tries to focus on the sensation of the water rolling over them to soothe himself. He focuses on his breathing, the sound of that, the sound of the sink, the way the water slides down the trough and into the wall.

He doesn't hear the quiet padding of footsteps behind him, doesn't see the reflection in the mirror.

He feels the rip of the tape on his chest, sees the mic clatter into the sink as it is overpowered by the sound of the waterflow.

There's a rag over his mouth before anything can really register, and the chloroform takes over before he can make a sound.

Will wakes in the dark, his head pounding.

It's cold, and he can feel a breeze on his face.

Outside, then. Why is he outside?

His heart rate picks up when he tries to move and finds that his wrists are bound. His torso, too, is strapped up against a tree.

"Shit," he whispers. "Jack? Can you hear me?"

The rasping sound of muffled laughter jars him, but his companion is out of his line of sight.

"No use," a voice says, slimy and callous and hoarse. "Callum took care of your wire."

Will stiffens at the sound of that voice.

"Gaul?"

He half expects the dramatic bastard to waltz out in front of him right then, reveal his dark form under the half light of the moon.

But Gaul remains behind him and lets out a laugh. It sounds shallow, strangled, like he's upset over something.

"Surprised?" he asks. "Callum told me you'd be brighter than that. Said you'd figured us out."

Us.

Will grinds his teeth for a moment, wondering where he went wrong. There was nothing in Gaul that screamed *murder*, nothing in Callum that said *accomplice*.

The motives don't match.

"Guess I don't live up to expectations," he grits.

Every muscle in his body is screaming at him to flee, but he knows there's no point in wasting his energy with struggle now.

"Are you going to tell me all your evil plans, then?" he asks, craning his neck to no avail. "Tell me where I went wrong? What's *your* design, Jeremy?"

He closes his eyes, thinks of his last few sessions with Hannibal.

"What do you *desire*?"

And Gaul lets out the smallest of whimpers then, because he's always been a weak thing.

"Callum," he whispers, and there's a shifting sound. "I have to prove myself to him."

Will realizes, then, that Gaul's breathing is just as limited as his own.

"Are you tied up?"

And Gaul lets out a sob, then, a strangled release.

"Yes. He--he said he didn't trust me. Even though I did so well for him before! But it's okay. He--he can do it on his own."

When Gaul begins to blubber, Will realizes that he misread the situation entirely.

"Jeremy," he says, carefully, knowing he's dealing with a breaking man, "what is Callum doing alone?"

Gaul falls silent for a moment, and with a sickening twist in his gut, Will thinks the man could be smiling.

"Killing him," he says, voice almost cracking. "He's such a lovely boy, never killed anyone..."

Will knows he means killing Hannibal. He can't waste time.

"Have you, Jeremy?" he asks, keeping his tone soft.

"Yes!" Gaul cries, *wails*. "Only for Callum. He wanted me to prove myself to him, and I *did*, I'm different, but now he's tied me up and I--*oh!*"

And Gaul babbles like that for some time. Will half-listens as he tries to piece everything together.

Callum resents the rich, clearly, but he hadn't the means to do anything about it. The futility of poverty in the shadow of wealth.

And somehow, he won Gaul's favor, despite the man's disdain for the lower class. Manipulation, drugs, sex... Will can't be sure what did it. But, somehow, Callum got Gaul to start killing people for him.

And that's why Hannibal was so sure he smelled him.

And Will didn't see the Egalitarian in Gaul because it wasn't his design.

It was all so muddled between the two of them, but if Will could just *focus*....

The pendulum does not swing for him, but it comes together anyway.

The Ballet, he thinks, had no more meaning than to tie the rich victims together. The FBI could keep track of them thanks to their status, whereas the lower class victims would be left to fend for themselves, as life so oft leaves them to do.

And Callum made Gaul kill them, made him bring them together...

Or was that Gaul's design? To bring them together as he hoped he could be joined with Callum?

Will swallows and presses himself against the tree.

"Gaul," he hisses, but isn't heard over the sound of the man's wailing. "Jeremy!"

The noise stops.

"How do you see yourself and Callum?"

Gaul hiccoughs. "Soulmates," he croaks.

"Two equal halves, separated by circumstance," Will supplies.

Gaul breaks down blubbing again.

Will steels himself and struggles to free himself of his bonds.

When Will doesn't return halfway into the second act, Hannibal is concerned.

When the entire theatre is forced to evacuate before the intermission, Hannibal is *livid*.

His first thought is to confront Jack for ruining his evening, and he almost gets the chance when he sees Jack across the parking lot. The man is frantically gesturing to a team of kevlar-padded agents, and that is when Hannibal realizes that Will is missing.

The theatre was evacuated because *Will* is *missing*.

Hannibal curses himself for his stubbornness, curses the Egalitarian for his affront to Hannibal's happiness, and rips the wire from himself, tossing it on the ground.

He will have to deal with this on his own. Jack hadn't been able to from the beginning. If he had only pulled his head out of his *ass* and stopped pursuing the impossible (catching Hannibal), then none of this would have happened in the first place.

With quiet resolve, Hannibal rips off his wire and leaves it on the ground, slips through the crowd, and finds a back entrance to the theatre.

No one notices him, because as much as Hannibal can attract attention when he wants it, he also knows how to shed it like any other garb.

He feels disgust rearing its ugly head, scraping at the inside of his ribcage with infected claws, dull and ready to sink its teeth. Rage rattles him, trying to escape his cage, and he loosens its bounds.

When he kills the Egalitarian tonight, it will not be a Ripper kill.

He has no time to calculate, no room for artistry. Jack is on his back. It will be bad enough in the FBI's eyes that he's snuck off to find Will on his own.

But, when Jack confronts him when all is said and done, at least he can honestly say he was overcome by emotion.

It's something that's become all too common as of late.

Hannibal only has a second to consider whether or not FBI agents have already begun searching the building when all of the lights go out.

The FBI's clever spotlights, too, have gone dark.

Hannibal is sure Jack's team will go rushing to the distribution board to catch whoever shut off the power.

He knows, though, that the Egalitarian will have put someone else up to the task. The question is, then, where the man himself has gone.

Hannibal steps away from the door; the FBI will be dropping by soon enough, and he doesn't want to be caught wandering off on his own. He considers it a very likely possibility that the Egalitarian has planned to kidnap and kill him and Will both, and he suspects Jack will come to the same conclusion. He plans to take full advantage of that conclusion.

He turns around and sees the trees that blend into the darkness, and pities the FBI. They won't be able to find anything; they don't know what they're looking for.

He shrugs off his jacket and tears at the sleeve, dropping it on the ground: evidence of a physical altercation. Then, he begins his trek into the woods, the beasts inside of him seeping out to continue alongside him.

Fury and possession perch on either shoulder, silent and ready to strike. Dread slinks along behind him, prodding him to move quickly, but his reserve keeps it in check, reminding him to be

cautious.

A larger beast looms in front of him, a mixture of everything that Will has managed to make him feel, guiding him where he needs to go.

Hannibal has always thought that love would be something that would blind him and make him into a fool. Perhaps it might, but now, it leads him to Will's rescue, and he can't imagine losing to the Egalitarian.

When Callum slips into Hannibal's path, slight and bitter and so very insignificant in comparison to what Hannibal feels, he feels frozen. Fury and possession threaten to take flight, because where is Will if not with Callum? And dread wraps itself around his ankles, keeping him in place, telling him *it's too late now*.

"Doctor Lecter," the boy says, and he truly is a boy, small in build and youthful in demeanor. He looks amused, and he is foolish to be so if he thinks he can toy with Hannibal Lecter and have a *good time*.

Hannibal remains calm in his exterior, steeling himself as much as he can, and offers a plastic smile. "Callum," he says. "What a surprise to find you here, of all places."

The boy grins with flat teeth, ground down from habit or anxiety. "Is it?" he hums, tilting his head. He's still immaculately dressed, looking as though he might pull a tray from behind him and offer Hannibal a drink—though, judging by the lump in his jacket, he's more likely to procure a handgun. "Your prize had me figured out, he must have told you. But then again, I don't see why you'd believe him, what with your superiority and all..." He licks his lips and raises his eyebrows, like his remark was meant to sting.

Of course, Hannibal hadn't believed Will initially, but not because of any class differences. This boy, he realizes, is unable to see anything else, and he knows that he can use it to his advantage. Latching onto his patients' neuroses, after all, is what always brings them to the edge.

"You don't mean to say that *you're* responsible for all those deaths, do you, Callum?"

Laughing, the boy takes one step closer, still far enough away that Hannibal would be unable to lunge before the boy pulled a gun on him. "Responsible is a good word for it, I think," he says. "Jeremy killed them, of course. I wouldn't want to get my hands dirty."

Hannibal takes that in with a carefully drawn breath. "You made *him* work. But for what? Your affection, perhaps. He seems to crave it, doesn't he?"

"You'd know, of course," Callum returns. "You've worked very hard for Will Graham's attention, haven't you?"

What he feels for Will, that wild amalgamation of a beast, stands between him and Callum, flicking an angry tail, cooling Hannibal's anger. "You've worked very hard to take it from me," he says.

"That's no reason to murder, though, is it?" hums Callum, meeting Hannibal's eye with a satisfied smirk.

Hannibal all but sighs. The boy surely wasn't going to go *there* with this, was he?

"I've done no such thing."

"Come on, now," Callum snaps, and draws the shotgun from within his coat, holding it with a benign mixture of confidence and inexperience. "Don't play like that. I know you killed Johann Nolak. You did it because you were threatened by me, and I spared you for the effort. And I know you've killed before... after, too. I could tell it all to the FBI if you let them catch me."

An ego complex, Hannibal thinks. Excellent.

"Well," he says, "I wouldn't want that. Perhaps we should negotiate."

Callum smiles, and though he clearly thinks he has the entire situation in the bag, Hannibal knows it's not the smile of a predator. The boy hasn't even killed before; he's just a charismatic psychopath under the illusion of being the puppet master.

Hannibal, of all people, knows how to be a puppet master, and Callum isn't even coming close.

"Let's," he agrees, and waves the gun absently towards the trees. "Follow me, Doctor."

And the little fool lets Hannibal come close, thinking he would *follow*. He doesn't even have the chance to scream before Hannibal's hand is clamped over his mouth and the wrist of the hand wielding the gun is snapped with one ugly *crack*.

He holds the boy tight against him, one arm clamped around his neck.

"For someone who seems convinced that I'm a serial killer," he mutters, "you aren't very cautious."

Close to suffocation, Callum struggles against his grip and tries to wail, but Hannibal applies more pressure. The boy is weak; there's hardly any substantial muscle on him. He doubts he even knows how to fight.

"Come on, now," he whispers. "Don't play like that. Show me where Will is, and you'll die peacefully."

He loosens his grip to allow a response, and the boy gasps, but proves to be smart enough not to scream.

But he still isn't very smart.

"How do you know he's alive at all?"

Hannibal jabs a knee into Callum's back. "Choose your words wisely," he advises, aiming to bruise at the base of his spine. "I don't like being lied to."

"Let me walk," he pleads, "and I'll show you."

Still from behind, Hannibal shoves the boy onto the ground, forcing him into his knees. "You will show me no matter what." He places his foot on the boy's ankle, right on the tendon. "You don't need to walk."

Callum tries to scream, but Hannibal silences him again with his hand over his mouth. The boy doesn't even think to bite or struggle, which is likely for the best. He starts to cry, though, shaking and sobbing, unable to take what he dealt onto others.

Hannibal feels nothing but disgust, everything else dissolving into the shadows. If one intended to deliver cruelty, he thinks, they ought to know how to take it.

"Now," he says, applying weight to his stance on the boy's ankle, "will you take me to him?"

Callum sobs, one broken *yes* coming from his throat only to be trapped in Hannibal's hand.

"Good."

Hannibal breaks his ankles anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the wait for/quality of this one. I've been swamped with applications and homework and trying to maintain a social life.

Y'all are honestly the best readers, and I live for every single one of your comments. Thank you for the kudos and for sticking with me on this! Just a few chapters left and this one'll be over.

Cruauté

Chapter Notes

Soft murder fluff, apparently. Apparently that's what I write.

Writing this is when I realize how much of a softie I've made Hannibal to be. Really, it's ridiculous.

(I love it.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Walk."

The growl of Hannibal's voice makes Callum whimper, the pathetic thing he is. Hannibal has encountered gutted men with more will to move, but this boy acts as if he's been paralyzed.

"I *can't*," he moans, looking up at Hannibal over his shoulder. He's slumped on the ground, face first and barely propping himself up.

Hannibal is filled with a white-hot anger when he remembers that Will has been preoccupied on the pathology of *this* homely little man. Gaul's, too, of course, but that slug isn't much better.

Disgust beginning to boil within him, Hannibal kicks Callum in the chest, which makes the boy fall to the ground entirely, planting his face into the rotting leaves. He moans some more.

"Walk," Hannibal snarls. "I will only carry you when your limbs are torn from your body." And while that would be a more desirable outcome for the evening, it isn't an option. The boy will have to carry himself.

With another string of ugly, pitiful sobs, Callum pushes himself up, favoring his broken wrist. Hannibal knows that it's nothing more than tender at this point; his ankles, too, are merely fractured.

"Let's see you get your hands dirty," he whispers, knowing his voice will grate this *degenerate's* ears like nettles. "For all your talk, you've not proven to be anything more than a nuisance."

The boy sniffs and gets to his feet, wobbling as he does so. He turns to look at Hannibal, his lip curling. A halfhearted defiance, but Hannibal appreciates it nonetheless.

"Take me to Will," he orders, "and if you so much as *think* to call for help, you'll be dead before anyone can find you."

Another deplorable sound, and Callum begins walking. The boy thought himself so cunning, stringing this night together, but Hannibal knows that it's pointless being clever if one doesn't have the strength or the power to back it up.

Perhaps that's why he used Gaul for the killings. Callum had no power, financially or otherwise. He gained it from telling Gaul to kill for him—for what greater power is there than that, to a creature like him?

He controlled one of those he had spent his life submitting to, and birthed chaos.

They don't walk much longer. Though all of his senses are sharp, it is, fittingly, his nose that tells him that they're close. A bloodhound himself, perhaps he didn't need Callum to lead him.

It was amusing, all the same, but it doesn't matter now. He smells the bitterness of Gaul's silver scent, but is more taken with the recognition Will's natural sweetness and the cologne Hannibal gave him. He had chosen it weeks ago, thinking it was something he would be able to easily pick from a crowd, something that sang so sharply of Will that it would draw them back together. Here, in the woods, the effect is not quite the same, but it works well enough.

He hears a low keen come from ahead, and he knows that it's Gaul. Callum looks over his shoulder as if to ask permission, and Hannibal grabs his shoulder.

"Where is he?" he whispers. "Your puppet."

"I tied him up," Callum answers. His voice trembles with the rest of his body.

Hannibal scoffs and shoves the boy, though not hard enough to knock him over. "How foolish," he mutters, "to have incapacitated your only defense."

He mewls at that, stricken, perhaps, by his own shortcomings. "I didn't think I would need him."

"You thought you could dance with the beast yourself?" Hannibal narrows his eyes, noting the man's slight figure; there's not an ounce of muscle on him, though he knew that already. "You've never had any practice."

Callum begins hobbling onward. "I hadn't expected you to fight," he mutters.

"After what you claimed to know about me? Did you prepare for anything, little fool?"

The boy hisses but keeps going. Hannibal debates over whether or not to strike him unconscious, lost for a moment in the cool, calculative nature of his position as tormentor. Never impassioned, not in situations like this, never ardent in his killing or his cruelty.

Until he sees Will, of course, bound to a tree with duct tape and cable. In the dim light, he can't be sure if he is hurt or not, but the looming thing that makes him feel as though he's plummeting tells him that either way, the hands that *dared* to touch his muse, his love, will suffer greatly, and it will not be done *impassively*.

It's then that he drives his fist into Callum's skull, a blow just behind the ear, and the boy crumples. It won't be enough to kill him, but Hannibal will worry about that later.

Gaul's cry in response is loud and mournful, but Hannibal disregards it for now. He runs to Will, falling to his knees immediately to touch him—his face, his arms, his hair (lingering there longer than necessary), and the polyester cords that bind him.

Hannibal is surprised that Will hasn't broken free of them, and in his stupor, the thought is the first thing to come from his mouth.

Will laughs, despite the circumstances. "I had to maintain appearances," he says, short of breath from the compression. "If Jack had found me instead of you, I wanted a story for what had happened."

Overtaken with bewilderment and concern, Hannibal buries his nose into the crook of Will's neck and takes a long, deep breath. "You were so certain that the Egalitarian wouldn't kill you," he mutters. "Foolish, darling, foolish."

"He didn't, though."

"No," Hannibal breathes.

"And you look alright," Will adds. "Not a mark on you. What will we say, when they find Callum like *that*?" He nods towards the crippled figure on the ground.

"It's not nearly as bad as he's made it out to be," Hannibal promises.

Will snorts. "It will be, though," he says, "when we're done with him."

Hannibal pulls away so he can see his muse's face, his breath suddenly just as short. "What do you have in mind?"

"They know too much. We'll have to kill them."

Will licks his lips as he says it, making Hannibal wonder if the statement is meant to be seductive. Either way, he feels heat filling him. It shifts into something less appealing when Gaul, from a few feet away, cuts in, finding words in his hyperventilation.

"You—you can't kill Callum. He hasn't done anything." He makes a strained noise as if trying to get a look at his fallen companion. "You've done enough."

He sounds more willful than Callum had in his pleading, and his devotion is something that Hannibal can respect, but he doesn't. The pair of them are both pathetic, less than pigs. They can't even be slaughtered.

Will continues as if the man had never spoken. "Nothing too gory," he says, meeting Hannibal's eye. "We don't have much time, anyway. We'll stage it as if they fought, makes us look cleaner."

Hannibal sighs. What he wants now is far from clean, but he understands. Their effort and their freedoms are not worth the death of something as small and sad as the Egalitarian.

The *Egalitarians*, he corrects himself. Technically, there are two of them, though neither truly stand for the word.

"Show me, Will," Hannibal says. "Direct me. This is your design."

Will laughs at that, full-heartedly, slightly bitter. But his smile is true, and it warms Hannibal. Even in the wake of a night as disastrous as this, Will still manages to center him with all his wonder.

The FBI finds them ten minutes after they've set the scene.

Will is untied, but wrapped tightly in Hannibal's arms. After all that's passed, Hannibal isn't sure he wants to let go, so tight is the affection winding in his chest. He feels giddy, strangely, which he passes off as the adrenaline of the night.

Callum lies crumpled on the ground with his skull smashed in. Evidence and their accounts will say that Gaul killed him in a fit of rage after realizing how he'd been used. The reality is that Will had struck Callum dead with a branch while his whimpering, would-be lover watched in despair.

Gaul, too, is dead now. His neck is broken, snapped by Hannibal. They will tell Jack it was in self defense, but they were never in true physical danger because of the Egalitarians, whose testimony was more dangerous than anything else.

When Jack finds them, led by his watchdog agents, he surveys the scene with a mixture of horror and relief. He makes a beeline to the pair of them, notes the way that they cling to each other, Will's back to Hannibal's chest.

Will makes a good show of seeming shaken when Jack says, "You two made it out all right."

"We did," Hannibal answers, barely looking at him. He runs his hands over Will's arms, steadying their breathing. In his most morose tone, he adds, "I had to kill Gaul, Jack."

It's the closest thing to a confession that Jack Crawford will ever get from him.

"I think I can see that," he says, glancing over the corpses that his team have already begun to analyze. "It's not how I wanted tonight to end up, but I understand why it did." He pauses, likely trying to surmise their combined emotional states. "I'll need to get your statements, of course. The EMTs are coming first, though. We need to make sure you're okay."

Will and Hannibal are separated, then, and Hannibal *that* does upset him. They have to trek back to the theatre, which takes a little more than forty minutes. It's no wonder the FBI took so long to find them.

Sat up in the back of a stationary ambulance, Hannibal remains still as a woman checks him for wounds. She prods the broken rib that Will gave him, though he tells her it's from Callum's initial ambush.

"Not my job to know that," she mutters, and finds a few more intentionally-placed bruises and scratches.

Hannibal stays quiet, keeps his breathing shallow, careful to replicate the symptoms of shock. She marks that down on the sheet she carries, and pats him on the shoulder when she's through.

"That your sweetheart?" she asks, pointing at Will.

He's been unable to keep his eyes off of him, of course. Will is being treated as well, though nothing on him was caused by Hannibal's hands. Gaul and Callum had treated him roughly, drugging him and dragging him out to the woods to be tied up.

"Yes," he answers, more faint than he had intended to be.

The woman offers a smile. "He'll be alright," she says. "But you know that, him being FBI and all that. Tough stuff, right there."

Hannibal doesn't return the smile, but he does nod. He means to tell her he knows, but what he says is something else entirely.

"I love him."

The woman laughs, but it's not mocking. Hannibal wants to glare at her, but his mouth drops open before he can stop himself. Of course, he's known for some time what he feels for Will, but he hadn't meant to confess it to a stranger first.

She pats his shoulder again. "You should go tell him that, when this is all over with," she says. "I've been working emergency long enough to know that disasters like these are the kick in the pants people need to get it done."

This time, he does manage to say, "I know," and she leaves him be.

He gives his statement next, keeping the shock blanket around his shoulders to maintain the appearance of innocence that is apparently seeping from him naturally. It should be a good thing, to have killed a man in cold blood and readily be seen as the victim, but it doesn't feel that way. He feels like he's losing control.

Looking over at Will, though, he feels grounded, and returns to the task at hand.

The agent questioning him has red eyes and a slumped posture, which Hannibal finds odd. It can't be that late, after all.

"What time is it?" he asks, breaking off halfway through his story.

The agent looks up and blinks; it takes a moment for the surprise question to be processed. Then, he checks his watch and curses.

"Two in the morning, sir."

Hannibal isn't sure how the time slipped so quickly, but he nods and carries on. He tells his story with confidence that Will's will match his completely (with the additions of the Egalitarian motive, which Hannibal hasn't fully sussed out himself).

(Will went to the bathroom and was drugged by Gaul, who then met up with Callum and then tied Will up in the woods. The two argued over how they would kill him and Hannibal, and Callum became upset and tied up his partner. He then ambushed Hannibal, tackling him outside of the theatre. Hannibal, however, convinced the boy that he would go peacefully. Hannibal went and behaved, but, to save himself and Will, put his psychiatric knowledge to use and provoked Gaul into attacking Callum upon release. In the heat of killing his partner, Gaul was distracted, and Hannibal succeeded in snapping his neck. He untied Will shortly after.)

Jack finds him afterwards, sitting down next to him in the back of the ambulance. Most of the chaos of the night has died down; the evacuated guests have been sent home, and the agents have stopped their scurrying. Beside him, Jack is as still as a puddle, head bowed in thought.

"You did good," he says at last, glancing over sheepishly. "I shouldn't have been so hard on you, before. What you—you saved him."

"I did what had to be done," Hannibal reminds him.

Jack or no Jack, he would have saved Will if he had needed it. He hadn't, not tonight, but the story works best that way. He hopes the world won't paint his love as some damsel in distress; Hannibal has not yet forgotten the voracity with which killed Garret Jacob Hobbs.

"I still feel bad," Jack confesses. "I dragged you into this."

Hannibal wants to chide him for the empty apology. Instead, he sighs and looks over to where Will remains, being interrogated by an agent with much more passion for the job than what Hannibal had dealt with. Likely, the young man wants to know about Will's *gift*, to learn what he saw in the Egalitarians.

"I came willingly, Jack."

Jack lets out a wry laugh. "I guess you did," he says, and clears his throat. "I hadn't meant to take advantage of that, you know. But I'm glad it saved Will in the end."

Hannibal fights a scoff, but he'll take the faux gratitude for now. He has plans for Jack Crawford yet, but tonight, he wears the affect of a victim.

"As am I."

A moment later, Will is released from the young agent's questioning, and Hannibal rises to meet him before Jack can bother him further. Will sees him approach, and his frown fades into something less jaded. His eyes turn bright, and Hannibal delights in knowing that it's solely because of him that they do so.

Hannibal pulls Will into an embrace, wrapping them both in his trauma blanket, holding him as tightly as he had when they were found. The relief that washes over him isn't just a facade, and he wonders why he was shaking in the first place, wonders why he hadn't noticed.

"It's okay," Will tells him. He presses his face against Hannibal's chest.

"Look what you've done to me," Hannibal murmurs, the words puffing against Will's ear. "I'm all aflutter."

Will laughs against him, and they both tremble with it. "I've made you emotional," he chuckles. "Is that it?"

"A cruel thing to do," he answers. "I was doing quite well, acting without consequences."

Pulling back to look up at him, Will shakes his head. "There are always consequences, Hannibal," he says. "It's just emotions that remind us of those things. They're what bring the consequences to us."

"Making me personally responsible for my actions."

He means it to be a grumble, but it comes out much softer, so he just reaches up to run his hands through Will's hair. It soothes them both equally, it seems, and Will lets out a small huff.

"Do you mind?"

Hannibal pauses, considering the night's events. It hadn't all gone to plan, and he certainly lost control, but he *did* survive, despite feeling more rattled than he has in over a decade. A shadow of

concern hovers over his shoulder, reminding him that they're not safe yet, but he shoos it off. It would be irrational for the FBI to accuse him of coldblooded murder tonight, or any time in the future.

As long as he doesn't slip up, that is. Emotions can cause slip ups.

But he does have Will there, stirring him up and keeping him in check. Will, who knows the ins and outs of the justice system, whether or not he remains involved.

"No," he says. "The rawness of emotions can certainly be startling, but they aren't all terrible. What I feel for you, for example, is quite enjoyable."

Will raises an eyebrow at him, and Hannibal *knows* that his empathy has given him the answer, perhaps long before tonight. Still, though, he asks.

"What do you feel, Hannibal?"

The grin threatening to split his face is poorly hidden, trying to repeat Hannibal's own professional cadence back at him.

Hannibal looks at the swarm of officials pretending not to stare, and he sighs. "Can't it wait, Will?"

"I don't know," Will says, planting firm hands on Hannibal's chest, concealed only by the blanket. "*You* were the one who asked to kiss me in front of a crowd."

"The circumstances have changed since then," he groans in protest.

Will doesn't falter, continuing to meet his gaze in challenge. "What, you can flaunt me in front of your friends, but I can't in front of mine?"

Almost indignant, Hannibal wants to remind him that these people aren't their friends, but he spots Beverly Katz with Zeller and Price, looking over evidence reports and likely muttering about all the work they'll have left at the lab. Hannibal remembers that they are Will's friends, and he sighs.

He gets another look at the crowd of FBI officials, not yet dwindling, and decides that it's not entirely inappropriate. Jack Crawford was, after all, the one to set them up in the first place, in one way or another.

He drops the blanket covering them, letting it crumple at their feet. No longer concealed, he places his hands on Will's hips and presses their mouths together. Brief as it is, Katz lets out a brief whoop before she's silenced by her colleagues, and Will smiles.

"See?" he murmurs. "That wasn't so bad."

"I'll have my chance another night," Hannibal promises him. "Another performance where we don't have to deal with the FBI or bothersome murder duos."

Will nods, kissing him on the cheek, warm to the touch. "I'll suffer through it," he amends. "For now, though, I want to go home. Maybe sleep for a week."

Hannibal can relate to the feeling, though he rarely has before. Even on nights prowling as the Ripper, he never comes home stressed or needing to rest. He isn't sure what floodgate Will's slowly been dismantling to allow it, but he's sure Bedelia has her theories.

He doesn't want to think about that now, though.

"I would be happy with that," he says.

Jack releases them with little to no hassle, though there is some debate over whether or not Hannibal should be driving. Arguing that he is a medical doctor doesn't help to do anything but make Will snicker, and eventually, Will says that he'll drive, and they're released.

The drive back to Hannibal's house is quiet, filled only with deep breaths and the occasional met eye. When the car is in the driveway, and Will has pulled the keys from the ignition, he lets out a deep sigh.

"A bit anticlimactic, don't you think? I was expecting more blood."

Hannibal smiles. "There will be no shortage of that, should you desire it," he hums, unfolding his hands in his lap. "Should you feel content to cease your resting this weekend, I do have a surprise waiting for you, out of town."

With a huff, Will gets out of the car, Hannibal following suit.

"Of course you do," he says, smiling all the same.

"For now, though, we should rest," Hannibal says. He takes Will's hand, leading him to the door, basking in the intimacy of the moment.

It's what they have, the two of them, and it makes him smile. Reaching for his keys, he decides to get it over with, before he's any more overcome with grand visions of romanticism. He unlocks the door, and when he steps inside, he spares Will a glance.

"I love you," he says, and then hurries towards the stairs before Will can answer. He doesn't retreat in fear of rejection, but rather preferring not to dwell on the moment.

He hears Will's indignant snort and the irritated shout that follows.

"Really?" he demands. *"Now* you're straight to the point? But not when I need to orgasm? *That's* when you dish out the flower talk, when I'm trying to get it on!"

Hannibal pauses halfway up the stairs, just to catch the smile on Will's lips. He hears the real answer before he's all the way up.

"I love you, too."

It's barely whispered, before it's concealed with the shouted, "I'm letting the dogs in!"

Hannibal doesn't fight the grin, going to shower off the filth of the forest, coming up with all the flower talk he'll need to make Will squirm in the morning.

There should be one chapter left after this. Thank you all so much for joining me for this story. It means a lot to me.

I do have other stories I'm working on, and literally 7 drafts of other ideas in the oven, so stick around if you're into more of my writing. Thank you again for reading this and welcoming me into this fandom. I wasn't expecting to enjoy it so much, and nor was I expecting to receive such positive responses.

Have a wonderful day, night, or whatever else!

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The cold of winter is beginning to seep in, but the snow has not yet reached this part of the forest yet. Hannibal's creation remains uncovered, though half-frozen, at the base of a tree.

He doesn't regard it as much as he takes note of Will's expression. His tongue worries over his bottom lip, and he holds tight to Hannibal's hand, his breaths shallow.

"You know," he says, not taking his eyes off of Tobias Budge's corpse, "I'm not sure what, at this point, I consider your first kill for me."

Hannibal smiles and thinks of the other recent murders, all of them cleaned up by the FBI, and otherwise consumed. He wonders if he should have brought their dinner. He decides, though, that it's best they eat elsewhere; this dinner will not be had with a show. Not this one, at least, which has been left to grow putrid and rot for several days now.

The animals have left the corpse alone, though, so Hannibal's design is still in tact. He kept them off with some electric wiring, which he'll take home with them once they're done observing.

"Does it matter?" he replies, stroking his thumb over the back of Will's hand, feeling the veins beneath his skin. "All of them are for you, if you desire them to be."

Will smiles—maybe bitterly, maybe not—and rolls his eyes.

"Are those flowers from the same batch you delivered to me at Quantico?" he asks, gesturing at the mass of half-rotted crimson foliage filling both the spaces within and around the corpse.

"Sweet Williams, yes," he says, and turns to touch Will's face with his free hand. He strokes at Will's cheek, idly toys with a stray curl at his hairline.

"You're a cocky son of a bitch," Will chuckles, shaking his head.

"No one will find this," Hannibal counters. "None but you, Will. This is all yours."

Will leans against him. "Red and black and gory and all for me," he murmurs.

Raising an eyebrow, Hannibal runs his hands entirely through Will's curls and wonders if he should ask if his darling reads minds, but he's left with a quiet snort in response.

"You were muttering it in your sleep all last night," he says. "Some sort of creepy mantra."

"You don't mind."

"No," Will agrees. "I don't."

They take a few minutes longer to admire the remains of the Violinist. After killing him and draining him of most of his blood (only some of which he had used for *sanguinaccio dolce* the night of the ballet), Hannibal had taken him out to this property of his, where no one would find the

displayed body. He tied Budge to the base of the tree, binding his wrists and nailing them above his head so that he might never again touch what was not his. Hannibal eviscerated the man next, emptying him of his guts, and strewing them about the ground in front of him to be wasted, compared to what he had done with his own victims.

As a last minute thought, he gouged out the corpse's eyes, just for daring to have stolen the gaze of Will.

Transformed, now, Hannibal welcomes Will's observation. He stays at Will's side, content to focus on his scent while he admires the gift.

"Alright," Will says, after some long minutes, pulling himself away. "You promised dinner, and I don't want to eat it here."

Hannibal dips his head and steps back. "Of course not. There's a spot closer to the car."

"Making me hike on an empty stomach," Will grumbles, but leads the trek back anyway.

"Not necessarily," Hannibal calls, striding forward to catch him by the arm. "I carried Budge the distance. I could certainly carry you."

He's met with wide eyes for that comment, and before Will can protest, Hannibal sweeps him up into his arms and carries him back to the car. It's Hannibal's 'murder car,' as Will dubbed it, not registered under his name and fit for all terrain driving.

"You gonna rip me up, too?" Will wonders, wrapping his arms around Hannibal's neck. "Make dessert out of what's left?"

Feeling Will's nose press into his shoulder, he laughs. "Not tonight, my love."

Will laughs, too. They're both giddy from the cold, from resting in bed for nearly two days, from being done with the Egalitarians and the Violinist. They deserve to have some fun, after all.

He only ends up carrying Will part of the way back to the car; his rib was not broken when he hauled Tobias Budge to his final resting place, and he would rather spend his energy on other activities.

While Will leans against the hood of the car, Hannibal retrieves the picnic cloth from the backseat. Calypso is asleep on top of it, curled up and whuffing in her sleep. She's still small, but no longer frightfully so, and when he wakes her, she slaps her tail against the cloth.

"Come, now," he says, snapping his fingers.

With a full body wiggle, she gets up and tries to jump onto the ground. For all the progress she's made, though, she's still clumsy, and stumbles upon the impact. Hannibal's chest clenches, but she rights herself immediately and quickly waddles off to join Will.

Hannibal lays out the blanket and sets out their lunch of soup and fresh baked bread, kept warm thanks to the insulated padding lining the basket. The lidded bowls of soup are hot to the touch, and Hannibal has to handle them with the napkins he's brought.

Will joins him, and Calypso does, too, though they have to dissuade her from nosing against the hot dishes. She is quickly distracted, however, by a squirrel rushing down a nearby tree.

"Wish we could've brought the others," Will sighs, watching her go after it.

Considering most of her time is spent at Hannibal's home, dear Calypso hasn't had as much exposure to the wonders of nature as Will's dogs. She runs head on into a tree, and Hannibal winces.

"They would have likely found the body," he reminds Will, "and *that* is a mess I would rather not clean."

Will smiles wryly and pries the lid off of his bowl, the vacuum seal breaking with a pop and a burst of steam. "Fair enough."

Calypso, who is struggling to find her way to the front of the car and back, will not be making the distance to the body. After several minutes of running around in circles, she collapses on the edge of the picnic cloth and licks at her paws, which have likely begun to bite with the frosted earth.

They finish their soup in relative silence, Will mopping up every last drop of the broth with bread. He moans appreciatively when he's finished, and Hannibal doesn't call him on the uncivil behavior.

They are, after all eating out in the woods, and Hannibal *does* appreciate his moans.

Will is focused on their surroundings, though. Despite their last night in the woods, he seems as tranquil as ever in the company of the trees.

Hannibal feels serene himself because of it.

"How long do you want to stay here?" he asks, thinking of the sightless Violinist up the hill, of the arriving cold, of the people waiting for their return in Baltimore.

The story of the disastrous opening of the Ballet, after all, has gotten out. Freddie Lounds will be the first hound on their tails, if she hasn't tried to get to them already.

"A few hours, maybe," Will mumbles, clearing the space in front of him and laying down. His head lands on Hannibal's lap. "I brought my gear for a reason, you know. I plan to catch at least *some* fish."

Hannibal absently strokes at Will's neck. "Of course," he sighs. "But after that?"

"We can leave if you want to, Hannibal."

"We'll stay as long as you like," he answers, smiling down at him, "but I was thinking more broadly. Would you consider relocating?"

Will frowns, but it doesn't seem entirely negative. Calypso wriggles across the blanket to lick at his fingers, and he scratches her head. "Are you asking me to run away with you?"

"Would you be averse?"

"Not really," Will admits, blinking as he says so as if shocked at his own response. "What has you thinking about it?"

Hannibal considers this, and again the Violinist and Lounds, but also Jack Crawford and the rest of their world. "As ideal as Baltimore's hunting grounds are," he answers with a sigh, "I fear there are

too many sharks in the water. I don't want a repeat of Friday's escapades, and I certainly don't want an excuse for Jack to be breathing down our necks."

Blinking up at him, Will shifts in his lap. He looks amused, lips threatening to curl in a smirk, one eyebrow raised.

"You want us to skip town before we do something dumb and *have* to."

"Well." Hannibal opens his mouth to argue, to say it's not so simple, but resigns and begins running a hand through Will's curls. "I suppose," he says. "It's precautionary."

Will smiles, then, clearly pleased. "I guess I wouldn't mind a change of scenery," he admits. "Would be nice not to have Jack watching our every move. Or be somewhere statistically less likely to land us facing off another pair of serial killers."

"We are *not* a pair of serial killers."

"Maybe *I'm* not," Will snorts, and lifts a hand to jab Hannibal in the chest. "But *you* are."

Hannibal stops stroking Will's hair.

"Oh, come on. You're not *offended* by that, are you?"

He just swallows. Will rolls his eyes and sits up to shove at him genially.

"Hannibal," he says. "You literally just brought me to a fucking corpse in the woods. Not your first one, either. That makes you a serial killer."

Narrowing his eyes, Hannibal just answers, "You would be the expert, I suppose."

"Damn straight." Will looks him in the eye, and his expression softens. "You're terrible, you know," he mutters, shaking his head. "But I'll move away with you, yeah. Run off and be your murder husband, or whatever the fuck it means."

His gaze lowers to his lap as he begins muttering to himself, and Hannibal watches with a curious smile.

"Murder husband?" he repeats, smiling. He doesn't mind that title.

Will glances back up sharply and glares. "No. You *will not* start saying that. Christ. *Murder husbands*. Of course you'd like it."

"I said no such thing."

"You didn't have to," Will reminds him. "I can read you like a book."

Off by the car, Calypso yelps in excitement at a stray leaf. Hannibal watches her fondly, and realizes with some horror that it shows on his face, judging by the gleam in Will's eye.

"It wasn't always so easy, though," Will adds, winking at him.

Hannibal scowls indignantly, but it's hopeless. He's spent so long fighting the beasts inside him, and Will's gone and let them loose.

"And to think," he mutters, "that I thought you would be the one transformed."

But, no, Will's beast had been there all along. Hannibal's had been the ones that needed unleashing.

Will pats him on the shoulder. "If it makes you feel any better," he offers, "I wouldn't have liked the dead body gift before I met you."

Hannibal sighs and settles against him.

"It does, darling. Thank you."

Will chortles, because it's not true, and that's perfectly alright.

Chapter End Notes

And that's that!

This is the first honest-to-god novel-length work that I've completed and actually been happy with.

Infinite thanks to the people who've been reading along as I write. It has meant so much to me.

Thanksgiving break is coming up, so i should have time to write more updates for my other fics, too! Hang in there with me, it's been a rough patch as far as academics go.

I hope you all have a wonderful week. Stay warm! (Seriously, I'm freezing. It's 12 deg Fahrenheit outside. My fingers are stiffening as i type this)

Additionally, [here's](#) a video of what would definitely be calypso. Thanks to the wonderful [diamerizein](#) for sending it to me <3

End Notes

Don't forget to leave kudos if you think they're deserved, and a comment if you feel it's warranted!
Let me know what you think, I always love hearing from readers :)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!